

Makishima
Suzuki

ill. Yappen

6

Welcome
to Japan,

MS. Elf!

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Chapter of Diamond, Episode 1: Dinner Party of Jewels

There stood a young girl, staring with her light purple eyes.

The shades of color within them changed depending on the angle, like glistening amethysts. Her hair, flowing in the wind, was as white as the clouds drifting in the sky. Graceful and vivid in color, those who saw her as they walked by couldn't help but do a double take at the elf's mystical appearance, but the young woman in question didn't even notice their stares as she spoke.

"I wonder why there are always flowers at the monuments here. And so many of them, too." It seemed the boy she spoke to wasn't aware of the elf's value, as he just yawned with a sleepy-looking expression. He looked toward where the girl was pointing and smiled faintly.

"Ah, these are offerings," he said in a calm tone that didn't seem to match his age.

The two were the same in height, but the age difference between them was quite astonishing. The long lifespan of elves was quite well known, and it went without saying that the girl was much older than the boy. However, the boy wasn't exactly as young as he seemed either.

"Offerings? But there are so many of them, and they're maintained so well that none of them have withered."

The elf looked at the boy curiously, as if she relied on him for an answer. This was likely due to her trusting the knowledge he had gained through his travels. He did, of course, know the answer. The bits of wisdom he had acquired through his long, long journeys were thus passed on to the elf girl one by one.

"Well, the household of the Blackrose family, also known as the Blackrose Clan, is really famous. They actually used to govern over this desert country. I hear that ever since they improved river management and blocked out those horrible sandstorms with a magic tower, people decorated Arilai with lots of

flowers.”

The boy picked up a single flower and showed her. He then placed it back where it was and stood up again.

“But this only went on until the king’s reign began, and they weren’t allowed to pay respects that way since. These flower offerings are remnants of that old practice.” The boy scanned their surroundings as he finished speaking.

There must have been a very capable gardener at the manor, as the branches were well kept, and the black roses, the origin of its name, were in full bloom.

Knowing the history changed one’s perspective. When he arrived at the remnants of the castle during his journey, knowing that a battle had taken place there certainly changed the boy’s impression of the place. Yet, the elf girl had her hands on her hips as she pointed something out.

“Oh, so we were playing haunted house at such a distinguished manor.”

“I guess you could say that. But considering its long history, maybe our classic approach was just right for the setting. Old houses are scary, after all.”

“Like the stains on the walls,” they both added at the same time, then laughed.

The rainy season had just passed, and the wind and clouds lazily drifting by were quite pleasant. It was better to spend time in leisure rather than working on days like these. That is, at least while the two enjoyed their dreamy time together.

“In any case, let’s take our boxed lunches and go visit Mewi. I’m sure he’s starving right about now.” The boy nodded in agreement and lifted his bag up to his shoulder. Colorful flower petals danced in the air as the two began walking slowly with a basket full of sandwiches in hand.

It was just recently that the boy had confessed his love to the elf girl. At that time, she had taken his outstretched hand in elation.

Although they were now officially in a relationship, their actions hadn’t changed for the most part. Though, the robed girl’s steps were noticeably lighter than they were before. As she turned around and urged the boy to

hurry, her voice and smile seemed a bit brighter, as well.

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Puseri, the last of the Blackrose Clan.

She reached out her hand and let her fingertips touch the glass window. The woman watched as the two of them walked away, and then a sigh escaped her crimson lips.

There was a somber expression on her face and a gentle curve to her wavering, lustrous hair that was reminiscent of roses. It was the color of twilight, like a moonless night, and her eyes framed with long eyelashes were the same color.

From an outsider's perspective, she must have been the very image of a somber young woman. An artist probably would have been willing to pay for an opportunity to draw her face on a canvas.

However, she was actually utterly troubled.

She had grown up in a privileged environment, and having inherited the noble blood of the Blackrose Clan, she had the appearance to match. Not to mention, she was an extremely talented and mighty warrior, but she still found herself at her wits' end.

So much so that she wanted to escape reality by going off somewhere with that couple outside.

She let out a sigh, making the window fog up a bit.

"Ah, how awful. I would be able to go out if not for this abominable piece of paper."

With that, she picked up the single sheet of paper she hated so much, pinched between two of her fingers. It was spotted with the sunlight peeking through the leaves of the trees above, and it was completely covered in fine text.

The reason for her somber expression was obvious.

The paper with a wax seal pressed upon it indicated that it was an account of payments owed, and the price indicated was enough to make a commoner

collapse right then and there. Despite this, there were many others like it nearby.

It was enough to cause headaches even for someone of a noble bloodline like her.



“What are you lookin’ at, Puseri?”

The paper was swiped from her hands. Puseri turned around to find a dark-skinned woman, Evelyn—also known as Eve—standing there.

Wearing very little to cover up in the garden of women, not only were her thighs exposed, but her healthy-looking bare skin could be seen from her shoulder to her armpits, as well. Her body was soft, yet protruding in all the right places, and her physical beauty drew stares even from other women. But the eyebrows of the woman with the alluring figure crinkled dramatically as she saw what was written on the paper.

“Gah, the heck is this?! Just how much debt did you have built up?”

“I do not know. At the time, I had no plans to become the next heiress. In other words, you could say this debt had nothing to do with me.” She responded with an unconcerned tone, and Eve made an exasperated face.

Puseri Blackrose grew up in a wealthy household, just as her appearance suggested, and she was coddled as a child due to her tendency to use her cuteness to her advantage. This meant she’d had a rather sheltered upbringing, and as such, she was completely unaccustomed to facing situations like these. Strangely enough, it was actually the free-spirited dark elf who was exasperatedly holding her head in her hands instead of Puseri.

“Huh... But I thought the Blackrose Clan was supposed to be famous. Whoa, this thing is expensive enough to buy a big mansion! Are you guys actually just famous for being big spenders?”

“Do not be foolish. It is only natural for a lady such as myself to take care of my appearance. This is merely a proper way of spending money.”

She spoke with a nonchalant attitude, and her dress was indeed classy and mature attire fit for an aristocrat. Though, her statement just now did detract from said classiness.

Eve could only feel despair. She could imagine that Puseri’s late predecessors had ignored the issue of this massive debt, accruing more of it rather than lowering their standard of living. Being a member of the same team, the situation was absolutely horrible to consider.

Come to think of it, maybe Zarish didn't even need to do anything... Eve gulped and shook her head.

She couldn't explore that thought any deeper.

The boy that had visited earlier was responsible for putting an end to their lives as slaves, but it occurred to her that the manor could have wiped itself out even without Zarish, the root of their anguish, getting involved at all.

"B-But what are you gonna do about that debt? You have any idea how you're gonna pay it off?"

"This debt has already vanished. Isn't that right, Zarish?" She spoke in an accusatory tone as her eyes of twilight glanced to the corner of the room, where a young man wearing an eyepatch was sitting.

He stood with his hand to his chest and his back straight like a butler, but he seemed scared... or rather, he was acting strangely. His body shuddered, and his one remaining eye darted around erratically.

The man was the former hero candidate, Zarish.

He once boasted that no one in all the land could defeat him, and he drew the attention of not only Arilai, but the entire continent as a force to be reckoned with. This wasn't surprising, considering he could nullify any attack that was slower than the speed of sound and immediately turn any who stepped within range of his sword into a corpse. Even if he was completely alone, he could have walked right through an enemy's line of battle.

"Yea—yes... Everything I own also belongs to you, Lady Puseri." With his teeth chattering as he spoke, he was hardly a shadow of his former self. He once ruled as the king of this manor, doing with his servants as he pleased, but the roles had since been reversed.

Eve's long ears wavered, and only she seemed to find this situation strange. Her blue eyes widened as she stared at Zarish. It was only natural that she would wonder why he was subservient to Puseri, despite not wearing one of the rings.

After all, she was the one who had dominated Zarish's mind with her Engagement skill, which allowed her to control his violent tendencies with the

ring they each wore on their finger. But through that night of occultic horror and physical and mental abuse spanning over multiple days, Puseri had succeeded in implanting severe trauma into Zarish's mind.

"Hey! You're showing her even more respect than me!"

"Ow ow ow! Iron Claaaw!!!"

"Shut up, I'll show you the power of my ring!"

Though, it was more like the power of her grip on her ring as she clenched her fist. Meanwhile, Puseri was completely unfazed by the commotion around her and let out a melancholy sigh. She then covered her mouth with the closed folding fan and uttered to herself.

"Very well. Then that means there is no more reason for me to worry about these liabilities."

Eve's grip, which was so tight that it could have crushed skulls in her hand, loosened on her ring as she noticed the unusual look on Puseri's face. Supposedly, Zarish had already paid off the debt when he had acquired the manor and Puseri along with it. So why did she look so somber?

Eve then realized something.

Despite having her entire clan murdered, even her will to seek revenge had been taken away by the ring's dominance. Now that she was free, it had to be absolutely humiliating to get a handout from the one who was responsible for what she had gone through.

That was why Puseri had been like a raging tempest for the past few days, but she'd gradually shifted to thinking about what she would do from now on. In Eve's eyes, it seemed as if the young lady was facing the detestable remnants of her debt in order to grow past her sheltered upbringing.

The dark elf nodded, then rushed over to Puseri.

"Puseri, I know this is pretty sudden, but why don't you be the master and lead everyone? You're responsible, kind, and strong, so everyone will probably count on you. In fact, I'm sure of it." Eve smiled and took Puseri's hands in her own, and Puseri's eyes widened in surprise to find her so close. Her cheeks

gradually turned red, and she hesitantly squeezed Eve's hands back.

"Th-Thank you. I was actually debating on whether or not I should bring up that very idea. Team Diamond is on the brink of collapse without a leader, and I am well aware of everyone's concerns."

"Yeah, everyone seemed really worried. It hasn't been decided what's gonna happen to the team yet, so I think it's a good idea. If you feel the same way, I think you should go ahead and volunteer. Then we can all live together happily!" Puseri was so full of negativity just a few minutes ago, but she could now feel happiness spreading in her heart. It was surprising just how much a few words could change things. Eve's friendly smile didn't waver no matter how many times Puseri blinked.

She cleared her throat, then squeezed Eve's hands that were well-trained by the sword. Then, with her cheeks still flushed, she parted her lips to speak.

"Whether I can become the master of Team Diamond or not is dependent on all of you. I will muster up the will to bring it up during dinner tonight."

"Yeah, you totally should. The Blackrose Clan has a history of leading Arilai, too. I'm sure everyone will be thrilled, and it'd make me really happy." Puseri couldn't help but clear her throat again. Taken aback by the pleasantness of seeing such a friendly smile so up close, she could feel her cheeks flushing again. She gently moved Eve a step away as she told her she was standing too close, then coughed lightly.

"We will need to make preparations, then," she said.

"Hm? For what?" Eve asked.

"Why, it should be obvious. Let us get ourselves Briman furniture as a celebration of Team Diamond reforming. I have always found the furnishings in this place too masculine for my tastes, and they don't fit Team Diamond's image."

Eve had no idea what Puseri meant and cocked her head in confusion. However, Puseri assumed Eve had understood her, and she laughed in her classy fashion. It was clear from the look on her face that she believed she was saying something completely reasonable, which made the dark elf nervous.

“Whaaat? Why are you trying to spend money now?! You’re putting yourself on the course to bankruptcy already!” Puseri flicked her folding fan closed... and the only thing Eve could think about was when that fancy, lustrous black fan had been purchased. The dark elf felt sweat beading up on her forehead for some reason.

“Hmhm, please do not lump me in with your typical nouveau riche. As a member of the Blackrose Clan, I will accept nothing less than top-of-the-line quality.”

“Wha...?!”

Puseri flashed a look of utmost confidence, and Eve felt her knees go weak. Then it hit her. Eve realized that Puseri may have looked capable, but she was one of those useless rich girls. She screamed internally and held her head as sweat continued to pour out profusely.

Th-This is no good... She’s an airhead aristocrat down to the core...!

She used money like water despite not having any. Such foolish things could have been possible if she put up the mansion for a mortgage, but that still meant she would have been heading straight toward the edge of the cliff. In order to keep herself from crumpling to the floor, Eve grasped at Zarish’s shoulders, who was standing nearby.

“Th-Then, how much of your funds are still left, Zarie?”

“Don’t worry, Eve. It would be impossible to use up my entire savings. I’ve been investing with the future in mind all this time.”

In...vesting? Eve was unfamiliar with such concepts of human culture, so the term went in one ear and right out the other. Even so, she understood the situation was dire and could instinctively tell that this was something that would greatly affect their future, so she inquired further, her voice trembling. She really shouldn’t have asked at all.

“F-For example, what are you investing in?”

“This may surprise you. First, there’s the promising oil fields and mines of the neighboring country of Gedovar...” Eve’s brows furrowed as Zarish explained with a confident expression.

Gedovar was a place where half-demons congregated, and they often waged war against neighboring nations. This reminded her that he had once planned to defect over to Gedovar. But now that those plans had gone south, what would happen to his investments? The answer was quite obvious...

That really was surprising! Eve screamed internally again.

Her eyes spun as she tried desperately to think of some sort of solution despite her lack of knowledge regarding finance and investing, and then she eventually slammed her hands hard against the table. The other two started in surprise.

“NO! DEBTS! Absolutely not! We’ll do some honest work, then buy things with whatever is left over after paying off living expenses! This is how you’re supposed to do it!” Eve slammed the table again as she enunciated her words, but Puseri... didn’t look impressed. She looked at Eve with a confident expression, then laughed as if to admonish someone who was bad at handling their money.

“Hmhm, whether we pay now or later makes no difference. So why not acquire what I want when I want it? This is common sense.” The young woman was so horribly out of touch that Eve could almost feel her vision distorting. She was hopeless.

This was the statement of someone who dove headfirst into self-ruin, and they would eventually end up saying, “It wasn’t supposed to be like this.” The shock was too much, even for Eve. She slid down to the ground and sat with her legs curled under her.

“So, Eve, now that we’re in agreement, I would like you to give me your support at tonight’s dinner party. Please let everyone know that I am the one who is worthy of being the master of the Blackrose Clan, and that I will lead us all to happiness.”

Eve was completely dumbfounded by Puseri’s absolute confidence. Not only would she fail to make everyone happy, but she would bring misery upon them all. So all she could do was retort with a trembling voice.

“Look, there are all sorts of expenses we need to pay for the manor’s upkeep, and you’re on the brink of being completely broke if Zarie and I leave this place.

So please, if you're gonna be the master here, don't waste any money on fancy furniture."

"You will leave your entire life savings, won't you, Zarish?"

"Yes, of cou—"

"Of course you won't!!!" Eve hit her beloved Zarish with a raging headbutt as she rose to her feet. Being used to violence by now, Zarish made a strange "Hwuah!" sound as the blow connected.

§

That night, when Eve unfortunately failed to stop Puseri's habit of excessive spending... the women began gathering one by one at the candlelit dinner table.

Each of them were beautiful in appearance, ranging from young girls to mature women. This was no surprise, considering exceptional talent and beauty that rivaled the glimmer of a diamond were the conditions for joining the team in the first place.

In any case, the women were quite strong. Despite their terrible past, the ladies were full of cheer as they were drawn by the appetizing smell. Now that their days in slavery were behind them, it was heartwarming to see them holding hands in joy.

They gathered before the owner of the manor, each spinning in place to show off their matching dresses. Seeing this, Puseri couldn't help but break into a wide smile.

"Oh my, how lovely. These dresses fit you all perfectly. Now, everyone, please take any seat of your choosing. It is time to begin the dinner party." There were no designated seats, and the women had no obligation to wear their dresses. The motto here was to have fun and be carefree while upholding manners that were becoming of a lady. Propriety called for them to follow a dress code as residents of a noble household, but this was a way of distancing themselves from the long restrictive days they had spent as slaves.

The eight women were illuminated by countless candles. Each of them seemed to be enjoying their meals, and more and more dishes were brought

out to keep them satisfied.

They had waited a long time for this dinner party. However, they each wore a rather difficult expression on their faces. This was because Zarish was smirking as he left dishes on the table. Although he wore a servant's outfit, many of the women still feared him as their former oppressor.

"Hey, Zarish. Wipe that stupid smile off your face. You look like you're trying to make advances toward us. It's disgusting."

"I agree completely. Makes me sick just looking at it."

It appeared they didn't fear him; they were simply revolted. However, it was far more hurtful for a man to be told he was disgusting rather than being feared. Zarish's shoulders drooped, but he continued distributing the dishes.

It was no wonder the women were rather bewildered. They had never sat around the table together like this, and they used to be the ones bringing the dishes out for Zarish instead. It was hard to believe the one who had brought about this change was such a young boy.

The former ruling system had come to an end.

But that didn't mean all of their issues had been resolved.

Zarish was merely under control due to Eve's ring, and he was like a ticking time bomb. They had no idea if or when he would revert to his old self, and it felt as if they had temporarily sealed away a demon.

There was another surprising thing upon the table.

The dish placed in front of everyone demanded all of their attention. The intricate presentation made it seem like it had been prepared by a master chef, and it was certainly fitting of the Blackrose clan's dinner table. Everyone drew in close and whispered amongst each other.

"Wow... Did anyone know he had this hobby all this time?"

"Hmm, such ornate decorations... How can someone make floral decorations like this using mashed potatoes?"

"Did he base the design off of the manor? It's so intricately made that it's kind of weird."

Although they didn't remember much from when they were under Zarish's control, the fear ingrained in their bodies still remained. But seeing such a stark contrast between his former demonic appearance and his current state, they were taken aback to find he was such a perfectionist. His well-groomed blonde hair, handsome features, and good posture made him look quite attractive as long as he kept his mouth shut.

As they chattered among each other, Eve called out to Zarish to stop him.

"This is amazing! You arranged the dish like the restaurant food I saw in Japan just from my descriptions. Come here, Zarie. You deserve some praise." She grinned, then hugged him as he kneeled before her. He seemed somewhat happy as his nose was buried in between her breasts. Though, the other ladies around them broke into more cold sweat at the sight.

"This makes me so happy. You still haven't forgotten the dishes we made together when we were still novices," Eve said.

"Yeah, I couldn't lower the quality of our food even when we had to pinch every coin to get by. Those days were so hard, I don't remember how many times I cried." Maybe it was the lighting, but Zarish's expression changed, making the others actually empathize with his pain. Everyone couldn't help but wonder just what had happened between these two in the past.

They each took a bite of their food, and their eyes lit up with joy at once.

Despite the dishes having been made with the same ingredients they've always had, they were surprised by the burst of umami and smooth flavor.

The somewhat hard meat was seared after being prepped, then slowly cooked in a stone oven. It was cut thinly to make it easier to eat, then mixed with a sauce made with citrus fruit to remove the odor. The women were thoroughly impressed by the cooking skills that had heightened the ingredients to their fullest potential.

Some of them were full of excitement and cheer, but others drooped their shoulders in disappointment. Among them was Darsha, the barbarian warrior, and Miliasha, a descendant of the gods.

“I can’t believe it... It’s way better than my cooking. I think I’m gonna cry.”

“Don’t say that! M-My sense of taste is different, so all I can do is slice bread. You’re far better than me in that sense, Darsha.”

Seeing Darsha biting her lip and trying to hold back tears, Miliasha couldn’t help but hug the female warrior’s shoulders.

Having endured the cuts all over their fingers in the past as they tried to cook, they didn’t expect to be shown such a massive skill difference at this dinner party. Tears quietly rolled down their faces as they embraced.

“Damn it... I worked so hard, too...”

“Ah, Darsha. Look, look over there!” Miliasha pointed as Darsha sniffled and complained.

“Huh? What the... Zarish has such a satisfied look on his face! Are you kidding me? He was enduring our cooking all that time? Kinda pisses me off to know he was being needlessly courteous...” Delicious food was not a crime... but, sadly, bad food was. The two gritted their teeth against the taste of defeat, but this experience would help them grow. Perhaps. Probably. Maybe.

Pop! The cork on the wine bottle they had gotten as a gift was removed with a satisfying sound.

They had received it from the black-haired boy in celebration for their team being reformed and as a token of gratitude for letting him stay at the manor. For some reason, Kazuhiho had said “I didn’t get to have a taste of this after all...” as he handed them over.

Zarish poured the ruby-colored wine for Puseri as the owner of the manor, then distributed it to the others. Puseri stood up shortly after, drawing the attention of all those in attendance. She then straightened her back, her calm voice reverberating through the hall.

“Please listen, everyone. I would like to make a decision on something regarding our future.” All of those gathered looked glanced at each other as if they had been anticipating this moment.

There was a reason they were all nervous. Now that they were no longer under the dominating influence of the ring, they were able to regain their will, as if waking up from a nightmare.

But each of them were there due to different circumstances.

Those who were bought as war orphans or slaves, those who were found on the streets and forced into servitude without knowing what was happening, and those who had lost in a duel... They were all anxious about what would happen to them moving forward. Seeing their expressions, a look of sadness filled Puseri's twilight eyes.

"We have all suffered abuse and had time taken away from us because of him... because of Zarish. But thanks to the efforts of that black-haired boy and Eve, we have been freed. You are all released from everything that bound you before." Some of them let out a sigh of relief. The head of the manor was indirectly telling them that those who were purchased with money were freed of their debts.

Just then, Eve, who was standing nearby, stepped forward and placed both hands on the table. It seemed the shirt framing her slim body couldn't contain her large breasts, and it was open down to the second button. The necktie hanging between them rested there by chance, rather than being positioned there deliberately. But the candlelight cast a shadow on her cleavage, and her colleagues chattered amongst themselves, noting how sexy it was. Eve then parted her full and alluring lips to speak.

"Hey, all. Let's skip all the formality stuff and get right to it." Eve cleared her throat, drawing everyone's eyes on her. The beautiful array of colors that met the dark elf's eyes took her breath away for just a moment. They really were like a box full of jewelry. Their former owner, Zarish, was pure evil, but he certainly had an eye for beautiful women.

"Freedom may have a good ring to it, but I'm sure it made some of you worry, too. To be honest, that's how I feel. I don't know what I'm gonna do starting tomorrow." She frowned, troubled, and some of them agreed encouragingly, "Of course," and "We're jobless, after all."

It was just a seemingly insignificant conversation. However, this was indicative

of just how much things had changed.

Although it was self-deprecating in nature, they were able to speak their minds and laugh together. After being denied the right to speak freely for so long, they could feel the taste of freedom at last, along with a feeling of pure joy welling up inside them. They enjoyed laughing together from the bottom of their hearts, and before they knew it, the tension in their shoulders was gone.

“So, here’s my idea. Why don’t we all keep living together? Luckily, we’re a bunch of really skilled people, and Team Diamond is one of the best around. Besides, you know... You’re all so cute, you could easily find a rich guy to marry if you want.” Eve gestured with her thumb sticking out between the fingers of her closed hand, and those who knew what it meant either chuckled at the vulgar dark elf or turned pink. Meanwhile, those who didn’t get the message just cocked their heads in confusion.

Then, a woman with silky blue hair raised her hand. She was born of demonic descent, which was evident from the whites of her eyes being black and the irises being white. Not only that, but she had curled horns reminiscent of a devil.

“Give us your pragmatic view on this. Our only options are to remain here or to join another team. Is that right?”

“Hmm... it’d be a different story if you had some place to go home to. If you wanna go home, I’ll send you off on a carriage, and I’ll introduce you to other teams if you want to transfer.” Everyone looked at each other in surprise.

Eve was the biggest victim out of all of them, having nearly lost her life. She had endured more persecution than anyone present. It felt strange to see she was the one who was willingly putting in work for everyone else’s sake. Perhaps something came to mind, as the horned woman, Isuka, hesitantly spoke up again.

“Eve, don’t tell me... Is this your way of making amends?”

“Urgh... That whole situation was because I didn’t manage my rings properly. I feel so bad about what happened to you all because of me. So... I’m sorry. For putting you all through so much suffering.” She pinched the inner corners of her eyes to prevent herself from crying and spoke with a pained voice.

It was clear that she wanted to atone for her mistakes. After all the pain they had endured, Eve wouldn't have felt satisfied until she ensured the other women would find happiness. It weighed heavily on her mind. But the reaction she received was an unexpected one.

"What, is there someone who has a grudge against Eve? Who is it?"

Eve watched blankly as the others all looked around at once as if they had no idea what she was talking about. It was just recently that she had told them about the rings, and she had assumed they all hated her for it.

"Come to think of it, I am a little pissed... at *him*."

"Yeah. I don't blame Eve, but I will never forgive that man." With that, they pointed at Zarish, who was standing back by the wall. He looked at them with an apologetic expression, but it was only because he was under the influence of the ring. Just as was the case with Eve, the personality of whoever was under the influence of the ring changed to become more like their master.

Isuka took a big bite of meat, then stared back at Eve.

"Why not 're-educate' him thoroughly and completely? The way I see it, you should inflict fear into his heart just as much as Puseri did. An eye for an eye, as they say."

"How rude. I have never given him any cause to fear me. Isn't that right, Zarish?" Puseri turned to Zarish with a smile elegant enough to make roses bloom, and his knees began to tremble violently. He looked as if he was facing a massive dragon before him.

"O-Of course... Ha ha..."

"Yeah, that's definitely effective," everyone agreed.

At the same time, Eve came to realize just how generous her colleagues were. They had their will forcefully taken from them and had spent years being treated as slaves. It was clear they were traumatized despite the smiles on their faces, but they always made sure they were being considerate of their friends. They really were as pure as quality diamonds, she thought to herself.

She felt warmth spreading in her heart, and she cared for them so much that

she didn't want to let them go. She then realized that what she needed to do wasn't to atone for her mistakes.

"I know Zarish is under control now, but I don't think you have to forgive him. It's true that he made our lives miserable, and it was horrible how he forced us under his hand. That's why I shouldn't ever be forgiven either." Such dark words were not fit for a dinner table. Although their memories may have been fuzzy, there was still trauma within some of their hearts. But unless they overcame their pain, they would never have been able to laugh from the bottom of their hearts again.

Before they left this manor, they had to regain their own selves. This was the first and most important thing that Team Diamond had to accomplish. They all came to this understanding without saying it directly, and each of them nodded.

There was a man among them that looked as if he wanted to say "But I'm being controlled right now..." but no one would pay him any mind.

"So why don't we all live here together? We could work together, eat together, and help each other out. I think that would be best for all of us. I know it's selfish of me to say so, but I love all of you."

The dark elves were a widely hated race. They were said to be evil, powerful fighters and were supposedly lurking behind every horrific incident that occurred. But there was another common rumor about them. Dark elves were said to be lonely creatures. This rumor seemed to be true, as Eve's tears continued to roll down her face despite her wiping at her eyes over and over again.

But dark elves weren't the only ones that had a tendency to get lonely. Cassey, who had a tail and triangular ears, had features very much similar to those of the Neko Tribe. Clad in an outfit that revealed her healthy thighs, the young girl slammed into Eve as she wrapped her limbs around her in an embrace.

"I'm living with Eve-nyan too!" Her body was warm, as if she had just been laying out in the sun, and Eve was taken aback by the narrow-eyed expression on her face, as if she was hoping for head pats.

"Whoa! Oh, Cassey, I wasn't done talking yet."

But one by one, each of the others stood from their seats, as if to show her that they already understood what she was trying to tell them. Despite their differences in race, skin color, and age, not one of them could bear to leave the lonely crybaby dark elf by herself.

Outstretched hands wiped away her tears, stroked her hair, and gave reassuring pats on her shoulders and back. She begged them to stop because it would only make her cry harder, but they ignored her pleas. They each knew just as well as Eve how painful it was to be alone, and the dark elf finally burst out crying aloud.

And so, the dinner party of the jewels went late into the night.

Chapter of Diamond, Episode 2: The Ruined Prince and the Detested Race

So, I ended up crying after all.

Such thoughts went through my mind as I took a seat. As one of the older ones in the group, I wanted to reassure the younger girls, but I couldn't help myself from getting emotional. Calmness was supposed to be one of the advantages of species with long lifespans, but I was acting like a kid earlier. To be honest, I was really embarrassed.

But for some reason, I was totally over it by now. This was the first time I felt totally relieved after crying it all out. Come to think of it, it'd been a while since I let myself cry without holding back. I wondered why it had come to me so easily earlier when I stood up from my seat.

Earlier, Puseri had declared herself a candidate to be the new team master.

She was the most skilled of the group, and no one questioned her virtue. She was immediately met with a round of applause, so there was much positive conversation about how they would move forward as a team and how the members would contact their friends and family they had left behind.

"I see you've calmed down now, Eve." As Eve watched the others with a gentle smile, Isuka approached her. It appeared she had been watching over her from nearby. Eve smiled, embarrassed, wondering if she truly deserved such happiness from kind friends.

"Ah... Sorry for crying so much earlier. I'm fine now."

"Seems so. Ah, by the way... Earlier, we were talking about how you and Zarish met. We couldn't help but wonder how the country's ruined prince and a dark elf ended up traveling together and arrived here in Arilai." She lightly tapped the gold ring on Eve's finger. It seemed Isuka was also curious about the ring.

The question came out of the blue, but the others turned around to face Eve

at once. Apparently, they were interested enough to cut their conversations short and listen. She could see the celebratory wine was running low. Now that they had finished talking about their plans moving forward, they were more curious to know about the details of the past.

“Whaaat? You want me to talk again? No way, I just cried my eyes out earlier... You might end up getting mad at me this time.”

“Eve-nyan, I have a seat for you right here. Come on!” Cassey beckoned as she pulled up a chair, and the others clapped all at once.

Eve took note of how they really didn’t listen... but many hands lightly pushed her by the back and butt, leaving her nowhere to run.

The last of the wine was poured into a cup. A glass was placed before her, indicating that they wanted her to wet her lips and dig deep into the story.

The array of colorful eyes stared back at her once again.

And so, the untold story was about to unfold before the beautiful women collectively known as “the collection.”

The story took place many years ago, long before Eve had met any of the others.

§

One particular day, the young girl had awakened.

She would likely never forget the moment she reached out toward the evening stars and touched something that fell from the sky.

It gently tapped at her as it flew around her still-youthful arm. The nameless spirit that no one had seen before spent its time carefully examining Evelyn like a bird seeking the optimal spot for a nest.

Eventually, it seemed to be satisfied, and the spirit sank into her forehead.

“Wow...”

The change came immediately. Her senses grew sharper, and the sight before her was as bright as day. Vigor surged through her body, making her feel as if she could run forever and ever. Her skin grew darker before her eyes, but she

could feel that this change was “something good,” making her heart race with exhilaration.

And so, the spirit dwelled within her mind and body, transforming the elf living by the shore into a dark elf. In other words, she was compatible. She had accomplished a feat that was impossible for an ordinary elf, proving that she had an aptitude for taking in a spirit within her.

This was a little known fact, but most newly-born spirits were terribly unstable, and most of them vanished from existence. The spirit from earlier had chosen Evelyn as its host, granting her great power in exchange. Thaumaturgy was the word that most closely described such cases. Some gained access to magic, while others obtained the power to control spirits they otherwise wouldn't have been able to. In Evelyn's case, she had acquired extraordinary physical prowess.

But due to the anecdotes surrounding dark elves from long ago, they were looked down upon as corrupt or cursed by the gods. This was clearly prejudice that had carried on since some individuals had betrayed their allies in the Human-Demon War.

Evelyn hadn't known about this incident until she returned to her village. She would never forget the look on the face of her mother, who had once been so kind to her, as she gasped in horror. Her father had the same reaction. Her little sister was too young to understand what was happening, but she seemed to realize something grave was going on when she saw Eve tied up with a rope.

And so, she was misunderstood due to how rare her kind was, and she was abandoned even by her own family.

She was suddenly left with no option but to live on her own.

Even to this day, she couldn't clearly remember what she had done for some time after.

Evelyn had a feeling something similar would happen today.

She let out a sigh, and water droplets fell from her robe that was soaked with night dew. Everything other than her eyes was completely enshrouded in

darkness, and she mentally noted how her outfit looked so much like that of the typical detestable dark elf. The color blended into the night, much like she had done until now.

“Our meetup time should be coming up...” Evelyn muttered to herself as she looked up at the sky.

Bits of moonlight shone down between the leaves above, illuminating the scale-like tree trunks. The tree was big enough to completely cover her body. She sighed, thinking about how she had to hide all the time now.

Even dark elves needed money to live.

And most jobs that were done so late in the night weren't exactly the most legitimate. This country wasn't the safest of places, and there were bandits lurking about intending to rob others of both their valuables and their lives. Her job tonight was to guide such scoundrels to their roost.

She never could get used to the look of contempt that was always cast her way. No, she did get used to it to a degree, but it changed her for the worse at the same time. Frankly, she kept her contact with others to a minimum so she wouldn't have to kill her own heart any further.

That was why the night was far more comfortable for her. She never got lost in forests or mountains even in unfamiliar lands, and she used her powers to earn a bit of coin by helping with searches or working as a guide.

As Evelyn waited, soaked in night dew, she noticed a lamp light shining through between the trees.

Her client tonight was named Zarish, if she remembered correctly. She felt herself tense up slightly to find he had a companion and a large horse, despite being in his teens. After all, she didn't have much experience fighting against armed men.

Evelyn took in a deep breath and released it. She mustered the courage to step away from the large tree, then walked up to the panting horse and raised her hand.

As the newcomers unmounted and Evelyn led the way, the man named Zarish

and his companions introduced themselves. The men lived with their lord of a castle nearby, and they were investigating the bandits around the area to secure the region.

Evelyn didn't understand it. Someone of high stature should have just left the grunt work to his subordinates and rested at home. Why would anyone reveal all of this to a suspicious robed figure like her?

Her eyes were covered under her deep hood, but her voice immediately gave her away as female. That was probably why they had started up a conversation with her. Or perhaps they were frightened of the dark path in the night now that the lamp was put out.

"So, what's your name?" the man asked persistently as they stepped out of a bush.

She had been moving at a quick pace to avoid trouble, but she was surprised to find Zarish keeping up without issues, unlike his exhausted attendants. He stepped lightly, as if not fatigued at all, and she got the impression that he was well-trained, despite his slender build. She paused.

"Will my pay increase if I tell you?"

"Who knows? But I wouldn't mind giving you half of my food if you do," he said, one eye closed in a smug expression.

There was something about the way he spoke that gave her pause. Zarish's wording made it sound as if he wasn't the one handling the money. And even though he had handsome features, his smile seemed strained and fake. She couldn't prove it, but it felt as if his big shot demeanor was all an act.

"Fine, I'll tell you just to shut you up. My name's Evelyn."

"Evelyn, Evelyn... What a lovely name. If only you'd show me your face, I could picture you whenever I lay upon my bed." She had told him her name as he asked, but now he wanted more. Evelyn let out an exasperated sigh, and Zarish drooped his shoulders in disappointment. His attendants saw this and laughed awkwardly, as if they were used to it. But the young man was unrelenting.

"How about this, Evelyn? I'll give you one thing you wish for in exchange for a

look at your face. Then we'll both get a happy memory out of all this. What do you say?"

What a foolish idea. She already knew his attitude would do a complete 180 as soon as he saw her skin and ears. He would immediately distance himself from her, then forget all about the despised dark elves as soon as tonight's job was over. Such thoughts circled Evelyn's mind as she aggressively walked through the night path.

As the angle of the waning moon changed slightly, Evelyn found herself staring with her mouth agape. Zarish was washing his sword with the river's water as he spoke.

"All right, now it's your turn to fulfill your end of the bargain. Let's see your face, shall we?"

Evelyn tried to tell him it was just a joke as she took a step backward. She had told Zarish she would show him her face if he slayed the bandits without help from any of his attendants, but she had no way of knowing he would actually pull it off.

As she struggled to find her words, his face drew close to hers.

So close. They were close enough to feel each other's breath, and Evelyn couldn't help but shrink away. She couldn't remember the last time she had talked to someone from such a close distance.

Zarish noticed her frightened gesture and touched her chin with his fingertips. He paused to think, then smiled as if a realization came to him.

"Ah, I see. I'm seventeen years old, but I have no problem getting women. I just wanted to carve your face along with your name into my memory, that's all." She paused.

"Fine, but I wish you'd forget it." Her voice came out like a pouting child from the discontent and confusion she was feeling.

But this would be the end of it anyway. Now that he had seen her face, they would never see each other again. She didn't want to see him cringe. He would take a step back, and... yes, there was that tense expression on his face. She

didn't want to see that look of fear and hostility.

It would cling to her mind and fester there. The pain would fade a bit after some time, but fresh wounds would be etched into her memories quicker than the old ones could heal. They accumulated like layers of stratum, coating her heart as dark as her own skin.

"Aha... I'm so done..."

"H-Hey, wait!"

She was running before she knew it.

Faces of those she had met until now flashed before her. She swiped at them, as if to wave away the bad memories, running deeper into the pitch-black forest.

Evelyn came to understand why dark elves were so hated. She had never crossed the line into committing heinous crimes, but now, she felt like she could. She would pass her negative emotions onto others, which would continue to spread like a curse upon the land.

Evelyn swiftly climbed up a tree and onto a branch where no one could find her, then began weeping silently. Tears continued to flow even as she wiped them away, until she finally gave up and buried her face into her knees.

She wanted to burst out crying. She felt like the darkness would fill the depths of her heart if she didn't. Just like the color of her skin she hated so much.

Evelyn stared at the lightening sky with swollen eyes and let out a deep sigh. Then, she remembered that something had completely slipped her mind.

"I forgot to get my payment..."

She had completed her job, but only ended up feeling like garbage in the end.

Exhausted, she descended from the big tree with her mind totally blank. Her limbs were powerful thanks to the spirit inside her, and she easily leapt from branch to branch and onto the ground.

Evelyn landed with a light *thud*, but then her shoulders jumped immediately. She could feel someone's presence behind her.

“Ahhh, wait!” She had drawn and swung her dagger, but she managed to stop the blade in front of the target’s throat. Evelyn was relieved to find she hadn’t spilled any blood, and her eyes widened as she recognized the face before her. It was Zarish, the man from the night before.

“P-Put that dagger away already...! Please!” She thought he was just begging for his life, but something was off. Zarish was straining to hold back his right arm, which was pulsating with bulging veins. It was as if his arm would hurt someone if he didn’t hold it back like this.

Evelyn sheathed her weapon in a hurry, and Zarish crumpled to his knees. He breathed heavily for a while, closed and opened his hands several times, then finally stood.

“Sorry to surprise you. My skill is so powerful, it’s known as the Guardian Beast. The thing is, it’s hard to control. This is how I beat most of those bandits before.” She was taken aback by the unfamiliar term for a moment, but her anger from earlier was still smoldering inside her. Her words came out more aggressive than she intended.

“Were you following me, Zarish?!”

“Well, I went after you so I could apologize, but I couldn’t climb a tree that high. Ah, I thought you might’ve been crying.” He scratched his short blond hair, then bowed his head deeply.

If his attendants had been with him, their eyes probably would have widened at his behavior. His pride had been on the rise, along with his exceptional skills, which bought him a reputation for being hard to deal with. Perhaps he had forced the others to go home so they wouldn’t see him like this.

“Here. I added my cut in there, too.”

“What? Don’t tell me you came here just to give me this?” Zarish pushed the bulging leather bag toward her. Evelyn had no idea how to feel about this. “I don’t want it. And if you were, you should have just said so.”

“Huh? I couldn’t do that. I could hear you... No, never mind. Just forget it. Anyway, I paid you even more than the promised amount. At least show me the way back.” He gave off a completely different impression from the night prior

as he curtly tossed the leather bag at her. Still, Evelyn found this far better than that forced smile he had on before. The way he walked with his back turned to her showed that he wasn't afraid of dark elves like most others were. Hesitant, Evelyn called out to him.

"You're going the wrong way. I'll lead you back. Follow me." And so, the two walked under the brightening sky together.

They hardly spoke the whole time, as if they had just gotten in an argument, but Zarish started to open up bit by bit. He revealed that, despite having noble blood, the royal throne was hopelessly out of reach. That was why he had been training in hopes of being recognized for his merits on the battlefield.

"So that's why you attacked those bandits?"

"Yeah, nothing beats real combat. It's far more useful than a predetermined training regimen. Everyone at the castle is just a coward that likes to talk big." With that, he took a big bite of some freshly smoked meat.

True to his word from last night, he had given Evelyn half of his food, as well. She had assumed he was joking and hadn't imagined she would ever be sharing a meal with someone of such high stature.

"I assumed you were fighting to protect your land and thought you were gallant," Evelyn said.

"That's the story, yes... but it's far from the truth." She had made an effort to compliment Zarish, but he just let out a self-deprecating chuckle. Then, he bit another chunk out of his meat, clearly frustrated.

The more time she spent with him, the more he revealed his dark side. Questions rose into her mind, like how he had ended up this way when he'd grown up in a privileged environment and possessed such skill with the sword. Perhaps this was the first time she had ever felt interest in a human.

Evelyn took a tentative bite out of the smoked meat and found it far too salty. She grimaced, and Zarish laughed out loud.

They finally made their way through the beaten path made by animals and found a single horse at the spot from last night.

Judging by the remnants of a campfire nearby, his attendants must have been there until dawn. As Evelyn checked the temperature of the wood scraps that had turned to charcoal, Zarish spoke to her from behind.

“Well, this is it. Thanks for getting me here.”

“Oh, no, thanks for paying me extra... Um. Say...” Evelyn said to Zarish, and he turned around as he loosened the rope tethering the horse. The dark elf took several deep breaths to steel herself, then opened her mouth to speak once more.

“Um, Zarish, your first impression was really awful, but I like you a lot better when you’re not trying to be someone you aren’t. You’re way easier to talk to this way.”

“Ha ha, where’d that come from? I thought I was putting on my popular face. I have to, considering my position.” His hands paused for a moment. He stood there, as if deep in thought, then stood face-to-face with Evelyn.

“The reason I was afraid when I saw your face last night is because my father was struck down by a dark elf. But that wasn’t your fault, and I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you.” The young man’s voice reverberated as the morning mist cleared. There was such sincerity in his words, and she could feel her impression of him changing greatly once again.

“I’m glad you’re not like the rumors say you are, Evelyn. Clearly, not all dark elves are cruel. But I’m not too different from the stereotypical dark elf, myself. I’m alienated, hated, and feared by others. It feels like it’s been a long time since I’ve had a proper conversation with someone.” With that, he mounted his horse, seemingly hiding his embarrassment.

Evelyn wondered why he had been alienated and hated by others, but she could feel they didn’t have much time left to talk. And so, she spoke the words she hadn’t said in decades.

“I-I, um, I had fun. Thanks, Zarish.”

“See you, Evelyn. I’ll remember your name and lovely face every time the night falls.” He winked as he delivered his corny line before leaving.

They were such cheap words, and so very human. They were so shallow that

no one could possibly have been flattered by them. And yet, Evelyn was ashamed to admit that she felt a shock run through her, like an arrow through the heart. Flustered, she hurriedly covered her face with her robe, but she had a feeling that he saw right through her. He must have.

Evelyn stared and pouted with a dissatisfied expression as the sight of his back became farther and farther away. He turned around several times, as if he was reluctant to go.

The dark elf had fallen in love that day.

She had traveled through various lands until now, as if she had been on the run.

She didn't want anyone recognizing her face or voice, so she avoided staying in one place for too long.

However, she stayed in this area for so long that she could mentally picture the scenery throughout the region. She wanted to know more about Zarish, and she felt an attraction to this land that made it hard to leave.

The giant water wheel was a sight to behold. She could stare at the regularly rotating wheel as it caught the flow in the waterway all day.

She even enjoyed the changing colors of the mountains and farms, as it let her experience the change in seasons more fully. Evelyn picked a flower that looked like cotton from the footpath and blew on it as she walked on.

The sound of migratory birds flapping their wings. A green topaz found at the river. Surrounded by her favorite things, Evelyn closed her eyes and pictured his name and face as usual. It was like a regular ritual for her by now.

And so, she dreamed upon the bed of dried leaves she had made for herself.

It was the same dream as usual. He was putting up that smug attitude he always did in her dreams. There was a darkness to the young man, and he only revealed his true face when Evelyn spoke to him. As time passed, it was as if the shadow was slowly being lifted off of him. She didn't understand why, but it just felt that way. Evelyn knew she was dreaming, but she spoke to him with

perseverance. Even though it had been a long time since she had spoken to anybody.

“Oh, maybe I can speak to you so openly because this is just a dream?” she asked, and Zarish gave an awkward laugh.

What bothered her was that Zarish wasn't very kind to her in her dreams; in fact, he would say things that downright frustrated her. But she hoped that he, too, thought of her name and face as he went to sleep.

She hadn't seen him since their last encounter. But she didn't need any more memories besides what they already had. Considering her inferior status and race, the memories of walking with him side-by-side and these dreams were enough for her.

Such thoughts were in her mind as she rolled over to her other side.

Just what was that warmth she had felt in her heart back then? It was like something had pierced her through the chest and implanted a jewel of high purity in there. There was something left in her that was taking shape without ever going dull or fading away. Indeed, it was like a shining diamond.

Evelyn closed her eyes and let out a warm sigh.

It was the night she had reached level 30.

The dark elf sweated profusely as she laid there, rolling to her side over and over again. Sweat ran down her sun-tanned skin, and her exhalations were hot enough to turn to steam. She felt something was wrong, but couldn't awaken from her dream no matter how much time passed.

“Huff, huff, huff...” Suddenly, she began breathing heavier.

Something pulsed within her like a heartbeat, and she arched back her toned body as she struggled to breathe. Beads of sweat rolled down and pooled into her belly button.

She didn't understand what was going on. Evelyn clenched her fists in confusion as this thought came to mind. But it was no surprise, considering she had spent her long life avoiding others. She realized there was so much she

didn't know, including the identity of that "something" that was shaping inside of her without dulling or fading away.

With each hot breath she expelled, she felt as if its form was becoming more and more clear.

As the time came for the sky to turn brighter, it felt like most of the heat within her had been lost. While she was taken aback by the sudden change, it had become noticeably easier to breathe. It appeared the long, long night had come to an end.

Lines of tears were left on her cheeks as her ocean-colored eyes slowly opened. Her body trembled slightly as she stared at the plain ceiling. She then sighed to herself and mumbled weakly.

"Haah... Thought I was gonna die..." She could still hardly put strength into her fingertips and wouldn't be able to stand for a while. Repeatedly breathing in shallow breaths, she ran her sweaty fingers through her hair and tucked the strands behind her long ears.

Then, she noticed something. There was something glimmering in her blurry vision.

"Wait, what...? A ring...?" A ring lay upon the dried leaves. She picked it up with her still-weak fingers and stared at it. It had a golden brilliance to it and a pure, highly transparent jewel embedded in its center. Its beauty was untarnished by any touch, completely flawless, and it had a heft to it. Evelyn pushed aside the curtain made of animal skin and peered out, but there were no traces of footsteps anywhere.

"What's up with this? I wonder if a bird dropped it..." She was still breathing heavily as she spoke. But would a bird really have carried something like this in the middle of the night? The sky was just starting to brighten, and the birds were still sound asleep around this time.

Oh no. It's really cold. The frigid wind on her sweaty body made her shiver, and she quickly drew the curtains shut. Evelyn then pressed her legs together and flopped over on her sleeping spot.

She groaned.

She flipped it over many times, but it was clear to see it was an expensive ring, and there were no names or anything engraved on it. Such a treasure could only be seen in places such as castles, and there was no way she could have stolen it. Since it was unlikely that a bird had dropped it, she began considering the possibility that it had just appeared out of thin air.

Her heart began to beat faster. Feeling emboldened by the faint hope, Evelyn rubbed the accessory on her arm while still laying on the ground. Then, her surroundings were enveloped in a pale light.

“Fruit of Love.”

She pinched her cheek, but there was no pain. No, actually, it did hurt. The confusion came from the fantastical skill name unfit for a dark elf that was displayed on her status screen.

“Love... as in, *mine*?”

His face immediately came to mind, and she shook her head to hide the fact that she was blushing. However, there was no one around, so she only managed to tangle some dried leaves into her wavy blonde hair. Face still red, she made a frustrated expression before rising. She then took a piece of string that was nearby and tied it around her long hair.

She was definitely physically weakened, but she still had to hunt and feed herself. According to the description that she had read on the status screen as she got ready, the effect of the item would be determined when her love would fully bloom. And so, she could only admire its brilliance and beauty for now.

“I wonder what love is.” Evelyn stepped outside and raised her ring to the whitening sky.

She had finally acquired her first long-awaited Primary Skill, but unfortunately, it didn’t seem to have any effect. But Evelyn felt as if this was fitting for her. It was an appropriate skill for someone who avoided others and quietly lived in isolation. The ring slid right onto her finger as if it belonged there.

Just what is love? What effect does the ring have? Such questions appeared in her mind as Evelyn stared at the beautifully shining ring.

Six months passed, and her two questions were answered. However, it was far from what she had hoped for.

§

One morning, Evelyn suddenly snapped awake.

The tremors running through the ground were like nothing she had ever felt before. Her drowsiness immediately vanished, and her eyes darted around the dimly lit hut.

“Something’s coming... from the east...”

Perhaps it was due to her living her life in hiding, but she was sensitive to ominous presences. She leaped up and grabbed her dagger, then rushed outside, still barefoot. Evelyn entered into the forest and peeked through a tree with a gash in it. Far beyond the stretch of farmland, a giant flock of birds could be seen flying from a distant forest.

She stared silently for some time. Evelyn could still feel the ominous presence there, almost suffocating in its intensity. Wiping the sweat from her brow, she muttered to herself.

“Whatever this is, I don’t like it. I have to find out what it is.”

She immediately turned on her heel and returned to the hut, then left with the necessary tools. After moving from forest to forest, she looked down from a ridge and finally realized what she had sensed earlier.

An armored cavalry troop could be seen making its way across the farmland. They appeared out of the forests one after another, making an arrow-like formation as they broke through the defensive line on her side. Their battle cries echoed across the land.

“A war...”

It was a sight she had seen several times before, but it was the first time she had been invaded by her own country. The weather was mild in this region, and she had come to grow attached to it during her long stay.

Judging by the scattering soldiers, it was clear to see they weren't prepared. Perhaps they had been ambushed, but they were clearly at a severe disadvantage. Smoke was rising from the other side of the horizon, and many were fleeing from the smell of burning farmland. They could escape into the mountains or forests, but their life going forward would be very difficult with their homes and farms burned down.

Feeling helpless, Evelyn walked away quietly.

This day, the alliance between the two countries was broken abruptly. Zarish's home country had begun their invasion in order to expand their territory after handing him over for a political marriage.

There was a reason the citizens were taken by surprise and their preparations were insufficient. The two sides had just recently succeeded in a joint expedition, but Zarish's homeland had gathered generals leading many soldiers and made a move to take over their allied power.

Suddenly, a powerful magic force could be felt emanating from a dragon that descended from the sky.

It flew toward the fortress where most of the troops were concentrated, then launched a magic blast that was radiant in the morning sun. Screams of desperation were raised from the soldiers who witnessed the scene, and the magic blast sank into the fortress and exploded. The chain of impact expanded both vertically and horizontally, causing everything from the people to the walls to be blown away. The enemy cavalry immediately came rushing in, passing through into the undefended area at the rear of the fortress.

Evelyn watched the whole thing unfold from a distant forest, her heart beating in terror. Cold sweat broke out all over her body, and the fear prevented her legs from working properly. It would have been wise to flee the country, as there was no way she would have been able to face an army.

But Evelyn ignored such rational thought and snuck around from bush to bush, quickly making her way toward the royal castle. She didn't really understand why. She rushed across the land with inhuman leg strength as she pictured the young man who had given her some smoked meat. The ring on her

finger glimmered.

Fruit of Love... The ring shone in the sunlight that spilled through the tree leaves above. Her Primary Skill's effect was supposedly going to be determined when the dark elf's love was awakened. Evelyn continued running, as if led by the ring, toward a hill that overlooked the castle. Zarish should have been there. She didn't know if she could help, but she at least wanted to find out if he was safe.

Just then, a group of soldiers appeared from her left, and she hurriedly hid behind a tree. The metallic noise of clinking armor could be heard as the men rode by on horseback, but fortunately, they didn't notice her. Evelyn was surprised to find they had come so far already, and she covered her mouth with her sleeve to muffle her breathing.

There were perhaps a hundred soldiers in the group all heading toward Evelyn's destination. The soldiers began dismounting one by one as they took control of the hill overlooking the castle.

As Evelyn watched them from the trees above, the voices of soldiers suddenly reached her ears.

"Sir, over there!"

He hesitated before saying "Hmph. So it's finally time to reunite with His Highness Prince Zarish."

Evelyn poked her head out from the tree in a fluster and looked in the direction the men were pointing. The thick castle walls first came into view, then she saw Zarish standing upon them. But she was confused to see that both of his hands were locked in handcuffs and the soldiers around him were pointing spears at him.

Why had he been captured by his allies despite his high standing? Evelyn was severely confused by the fact that he was being treated as if he was a hostage.

The man who seemed to be the staff officer stroked his beard as he began to speak.

"Hah, they still think he has any worth as a hostage? Those fools actually still believe the political marriage was real even though they're now being invaded. I

would have fled as soon as I could.”

“What shall we do? Would you like to wait for the main unit as planned?” a soldier asked nervously, and the well-built man grinned.

“Shoot him down. It’s quite convenient that he appeared before us.”

“Sir? B-But...”

“He is more trouble than he is worth alive. A disposed prince with the blood of a ruined country. There are orders from His Majesty himself to eliminate him completely to avoid any trouble down the line.” Evelyn’s eyes shot wide open.

Zarish’s words from long ago replayed in her mind. He had once mentioned that despite having noble blood, the royal throne was hopelessly out of his reach. Not only that, but he said he wouldn’t be recognized unless a war broke out or something.

“But I’m not too different from the stereotypical dark elf, myself. I’m alienated, hated, and feared by others.” She could hear his words as clearly as if he had just said them to her yesterday. Their meaning was unclear back then. But now, she finally understood.

He had mentioned that his father was killed, as well. So perhaps his mother was the queen of the country that had been conquered. If so, he would no longer have a homeland to return to, and now that he was caught in a fake political marriage, he would be hated by both his own family and the people he was supposedly forming an alliance with. It was just as he had said. Back during their conversation, he was revealing something he couldn’t share with anyone else.

“Well, I’m sure Prince Zarish is glad to be useful in the end. Now, ready your arrows.” It was too cruel. Evelyn couldn’t help but feel sorry for Zarish, far more than she ever had for herself. She gritted her teeth, deep furrows forming between her brows.

The bows equipped by the soldiers were quite powerful. They creaked as they were drawn back, then pointed into the air in formation. The combination of the elite archers and enhancers allowed the arrows to defy the laws of physics, turning them into deadly weapons heading straight toward their target.

Fwoosh! Fwoosh! Fwoosh! The arrows were launched all at once, flying through the air in a slight arc before speeding forward in a straight line. Those at the castle wall seemed to notice they were being fired upon and quickly raised a barrier, but the first half of the volley tore through the barrier, and the remaining half pierced their targets.

The spray of blood belonged to Zarish's servants that were restrained at his sides. Despite being restrained, sparks had flashed before Zarish as he deflected the incoming arrows. He had countered them with some invisible force, and he stood there breathing heavily.

The commotion from the castle walls was carried over by the wind. The sudden attack had caused chaos among the defenders. Watching them run about in confusion, the man rubbed his beard again.

"Ah, so he has already begun learning to control the Guardian Beast. Quite the troublesome bloodline, indeed."

"B-But what shall we do...?!"

"Use piercing arrows. Continue the barrage, and he will eventually be exhausted. Do so quickly. Once that's done, we will break down the castle walls next."

The staff officer's words felt like a knife plunging into Evelyn's heart as she remained, lurking in the shadows. She turned toward the rumbling below to find the cavalry soldiers. They had already begun to breach the defensive line. All she could feel was despair, and she couldn't stop her body from trembling.

(What do I do, what do I do, what do I do?!) Evelyn completely lost her composure and was unable to think straight. She would only get herself killed if she jumped out now, and it was unlikely that she would be able to stop that man's orders. If, by some miracle, she could stop the arrow volleys, there was still an army to deal with. Even if she somehow slipped past it and headed to the castle walls, she wouldn't make it in time.

Zarish was just someone she had worked with once. There was no reason to risk her life for him, and she still had time to flee if she made her move now. Her rational side told her that getting out of there before her escape route got cut off was the best option.

However, a thought crossed her mind.

If she just sat there and watched him die, what would she have left?

Then came another thought. What was wrong with a dark elf falling in love?

If she did escape this situation, she would only return to that miserable life that could hardly have been called living. So, once... Just once, maybe she could do what she felt was right. When she couldn't finish that salty smoked meat, he laughed and finished the rest without minding the fact that she had taken a bite of it. Why couldn't she cherish such memories?

Evelyn sniffled, then tapped deep into the powers bestowed upon her as a dark elf. She had feared her own ability to contain a spirit inside of her and had sealed it away since childhood, but now she accepted it with all of her being.

“Dwell inside me, Valkyrie...!”

Valkyrie, the spirit of bravery... Evelyn's body grew so hot that it felt as if it would emit smoke, and her powerful muscles bulged even further. She tossed her robe aside, and the wild and beautiful dark elf stood tall.

An unknown force came out of her mouth as she let out a low growl, and she sprinted forward with an explosive burst of energy.

Even she couldn't stop it now. She could feel it just from the pure heat that was being expelled with her breath. Several of the soldiers seemed to notice her as she leaped forward, but they readied their bows anyway. Evelyn stared at their throats.

“Hrgh!”

“Nngh!”

She reflexively tossed out her knives, each of them embedding themselves into the archers' throats. The war horses whinnied as the smell of blood filled the air.

“A dark elf?! Where did you come from?!”

She darted forward as she mentally told them to shut up. They had no right to look down on her after deceiving Zarish and laughing as they tried to kill him.

The officer's voice rang out behind her, but she disregarded it as she drew a sword from its sheath. The one-handed sword had a slight arc to it and glinted in the sunlight. It was as brilliant as some kind of holy sword, and Evelyn, so full of courage in that moment, had an animalistic grin on her face.

She sensed something flying toward her from behind. Evelyn instinctively tilted her head to the side, and an arrow passed through the spot her head had been just a moment ago.

She felt no fear for the death lurking around the corner. There was no need to think. She would dive into the fray as she saw fit and save him. The two who were so detested by the world would hold hands and flee together. If anyone planned to get in the way...

"Who the hell...?!"

"Get out of the way!" Evelyn shouted at the giant cavalry soldiers charging toward her from the side. Even the spear closing in on her was nothing to fear. She quickly darted to the left and right with intricate steps to evade the weapon, then immediately jumped up and sliced the soldier's throat. The soldier made pained gestures as blood sprayed out of his wound, but she just kicked off of the horse, flipped in the air, and then kicked the rider right in the throat. She switched places with him as his body fell to the ground, then took hold of the reins.

The black charger continued running, but looked back at Evelyn with its blue eyes, as if wondering what was going on. A spark could be heard from its eye as Evelyn sent a spirit into the creature. Elves had been adept at handling animals since the olden days.

The muscles throughout the black armored horse's body bulged, and a barrier was formed around it as the beast charged forward. To no one's surprise, countless arrows were released into the air as the horse ran through the front lines. But Evelyn felt no fear. There was only one thought in her head at the moment.

...Faster. Faster. Faster! After several seconds of delay, the arrows rained down upon her. The transparent barrier and war horse were both quite powerful, but they could only buy so much time while being shot at from the

rear and castle walls. The barrier could be heard cracking under the accumulating damage. Yet, she still didn't fear death. Through the sound of thundering hooves, all she could think of was him.

She couldn't help but sympathize.

Welcomed by no one, trusted by no one, all he could do was continue resisting his accursed fate. She couldn't just let him die after being used without his efforts coming to fruition. That officer, the cowardly men at the castle, and the rest of the soldiers on the battlefield deserved no forgiveness. Rage brewed within her like a boiling pot.

The horse flew through the air as its leg was pierced by an arrow, and Evelyn used the impact to leap forward once again. She used her muscles like a coil to power her momentum, then kicked off of a slight protrusion on the castle wall.

As she continued forward while moving to the left and right to evade arrows from above, she could feel the spirit controlling her body growing more active. Letting this go any further would be dangerous. Her instincts told her that even her well-trained body would break down under the stress if she continued.

But that didn't matter. No one loved her in the first place; if she couldn't save him, she had no qualms about losing her life trying. The veins in her arms bulged as she clung to the 50-meter-tall wall and lifted herself up.

Her breath was so hot, it felt as if she was breathing fire. Under the breathtakingly blue sky was a row of heavily armored soldiers with large shields at the ready.

A strong gust of wind blew by, and the soldiers were visibly shaken by her exposed dark skin and long ears. Evelyn, on the other hand, was relieved from the bottom of her heart. Before she knew it, a smile was spreading across her face. On the other side of the soldiers, she could see Zarish in chains. She had made it just in time.

Evelyn spoke to him with the same cheerful tone she had used on that day when the darkness in her heart had been cleared.

"Long time no see, Zarish."

"What... are you doing here...?" Some greeting that was. Arrows passed

under her armpit and where her head had been before she dodged it with a head tilt, and several spears were thrust forward in an attempt to knock her down. It was quite a lot of work getting here, so the least he could have done was acknowledge the effort. Though, that wouldn't have been enough. Hearing his voice for the first time in years, she could feel her heart thumping.

She had to move forward without fear. It wasn't as if she had anything like smarts to offer. This momentum was her everything. And despite the seemingly hopeless situation, even a child could tell what she had to do next.

And so, she leaped into the air, kicked off of an armored soldier's shoulder, flipped in midair, and used the momentum to deliver a blow to Zarish's shackles. The impact broke the magic seal along with the metal shackles, setting him free at last.

As silence fell around them, Evelyn could feel that she had made the right move. It was as if the heavy chains were there out of fear of letting loose a ferocious beast, and they looked as if their worst nightmare had come true.

After a moment's pause, Zarish unleashed his fury.

"Ah, ah, ah...!"

"Kill him!"

They were so afraid of him that they gave the order to kill him, despite him being a hostage. Zarish's inexplicable powers, the so-called Guardian Beast mentioned by the officer, allowed him to cut up those around him without a sword. And so, he trampled down his foes. He deflected swords as they tried to attack him and brutally cut down his former allies without an ounce of mercy. Now that his hands and feet were free, he raged through the castle walls like a tempest.

An authority figure among the soldiers had his skull caved in, and then the other elite soldiers were sent flying through the air in the next moment. All Evelyn could do was sit there with a blank expression as the chaos unfolded and red blood sprayed everywhere.

"Ha ha, haaah! Die, you dirty bastards!!!" It was like Zarish's rage and dark emotions had manifested into a storm. Evelyn was afraid that happy smile she

had seen that day would disappear along with everything else.

But she realized there wasn't much time to think about that when she noticed the enemy army's dragon flying toward them from above. Dragging Zarish out of there as he still tried to continue his rampage was no easy task.

§

Zarish awakened and found himself in a forest.

Burning farmland and a crumbling defensive line could be seen in the distance, and everywhere he looked was filled with smoke. It was thanks to the smoke that they were able to conceal themselves, but Evelyn felt conflicted.

This place would no longer be habitable until the war was over. The water wheel was engulfed in flames, and the scenery she had admired for so long had vanished just like that. As Evelyn stared, dumbfounded, Zarish approached her. She turned to him and saw his haggard face glancing around, trying to understand the current situation.

Then, he spoke weakly.

"It's fine. This isn't even my land or anything. I wasn't born here either. They can all die, for all I care." With that, Zarish plopped down onto the ground.

Evelyn wasn't sure if she should let him be, but tentatively asked, "What do you want to do now?" He paused.

"I'm sick of it all. I'm tired of trying to please others and letting others control my fate." Zarish picked at the grass on the ground before him. He looked pale, and there was a darkness to his eyes, as if he was already dead. It felt as if he would perish right then and there if Evelyn left him there, and the thought pained her.

"Damn it, damn it! None of them even had the guts to face me head-on! Those fucking cowards just love their scheming, don't they?! How dare they look down on me..." He exhaled, his shoulders trembling. Evelyn gently embraced him, but he roughly smacked her cheek with his fist. She ignored it and hugged him again, and he didn't resist this time.

"I want to kill them... I want to kill everyone who tried to kill me!" Evelyn shed

tears as she listened to his strained voice. The darkness inside of him had grown so much deeper since they last met. It engulfed him so completely that she couldn't even see the Zarish she once knew. If one wanted to live for a long time, they had to kill their emotions. This went for both the dark elf and Zarish.

It was so utterly unfortunate. He was once such a kind young man.

Evelyn then stole two horses and set out with him to cross the border.

Having been drained of his spirit, Zarish just did as Evelyn directed him. But his gloominess made her uneasy, like watching a stew continuously boiling under pressure. And so, she tried many times to speak to him cheerfully like she had pictured in her dreams.

"I heard there's a country far away where there's nothing but sand. Wanna go check it out together?"

"..."

"Oh, I wonder if this horse will be okay there. They say the ground is scorching hot."

"Shut up, dark elf."

I wish you'd call me Evelyn. She couldn't bring herself to say the words.

One day, Evelyn's traveling expenses were exhausted. There was nothing left she could trade for goods, and she didn't want to waste much time hunting animals with persistent pursuers on their tail. The only thing she had left was the golden ring on her ring finger.

"Um, I'll go sell this at a nearby village."

"Do it. It's useless anyway." He was right. This ring was supposedly going to establish its Primary Skill when her love bloomed. That meant it was useless at this point, so it might have been more beneficial to sell it. But for some reason, she found herself sniffing, and tears blurred her vision. She didn't understand why herself, but it seemed she was sad about it.

Just what was this thing? Why did she acquire something that would wilt away without ever blooming? The sound of migratory birds flapping their wings.

A green topaz found at the river. These and her ring were her favorite things that she had always looked forward to when settling down to sleep at night. She was going to lose one of the things precious to her.

As Evelyn held her horse's reins and stepped toward the village, Zarish called out for her. But it wasn't out of consideration for her loss.

"Wait, dark elf. You're just like them, aren't you? You're thinking of selling me out."

"What? Why would you... I would never do that." She felt her shoulders tremble. His eyes were like those of a beast, and the way he looked at her like an enemy scared her. But he misinterpreted the reason she was trembling. It had reaffirmed his suspicion.

He grabbed her by the collar and pushed her against the ground before she could raise her voice. The road was nearby, and if she shouted, someone could hear and help her, if she was lucky. But something told her that would only end up poorly for Zarish.

And so, Evelyn gave up everything as his hands closed around her neck.

She had lived as a dark elf, hated by others, only to be killed by the man she loved in the end. Perhaps it was a fitting end for her. Well, it was better than getting killed by some stranger. But the way he looked at her like an enemy as he choked her made her horribly sad.

Sadness. Such deep sadness.

It pained her to think that he would lose the will to go on and die soon after.

As everything gradually turned red, her final words left her mouth without conscious thought.

"Za...rish... Good...bye... don't die... Please, be... happy..."

That was everything. There were no other words to leave for him in this world. She wanted him to live on. She wanted him to be happy. And she wanted him to laugh again, like he did so long ago. That was why she had mustered up her courage to charge through that battlefield.

His hand trembled, and the pressure upon her throat suddenly vanished. He

pressed his head against her, letting out a guttural cry.

“Uuurgh... Evelyn! Aghhh!” On the verge of passing out, Evelyn repeatedly gasped for breath as she held his head against her.

He was the only one. He was the only one who ever spoke to her with kindness. Zarish cried like a big child, his hot tears landing on her as he wept. She accepted its warmth lovingly, holding tight onto his head with both arms. She didn’t want his heart to break ever again.

“I want my own country! Urgh, all my own...!”

You don’t need a country. Besides, I already know... You’re a very kind person. You scare easily, and you’d flee right away if you didn’t have your blades surrounding you.

You kept your promise and shared your smoked meat with me.

You’re a strange person who waited the whole time for a dark elf to stop crying, even though we’re hated by everyone. You did what you could to survive, wearing that mask of confidence despite being so afraid. And you remembered my name and face after all this time, just as you promised.

I finally understand now. As soon as I held his head in my arms, I understood. I always wondered what love is. Love... is to know someone. It’s when someone is precious to you even after knowing all of the pure and dark parts about them.

He’s the kind of man who tried to choke me out, so he’s probably not a very good person. I even risked my life to save him. I can’t believe he’d do such a thing, and I’ve heard people say this is the kind of man who made women miserable.

But he’s still precious to me. I don’t want him to die. I want him to eat some delicious food, sleep well, and be as lively as he was back then. Things will be hard with pursuers on our tail, but I’d love to eat some smoked meat with you again some time. What do you think?

Before I knew it, tears wet my face as they rolled down my cheeks. I wondered why I was crying so much, but then realized it was because Zarish’s tears were landing on my cheeks, too.

I held his hands softly. I thought to myself that it would all be okay. We were probably the only ones who understood what it was like to be looked down upon, condemned, and abused until our hearts were in tatters like this.

Just then, something glimmered nearby. It was the ring on my ring finger, shining as if it had been waiting for this moment the whole time. Zarish and I widened our eyes in surprise.

“What... is this?”

“It’s my Primary Skill, I think,” I whispered.

The golden light may have been born from her purity.

For protecting a loved one. For protecting someone as their master. For uniting two people into one after exposing themselves and understanding one another. Such were the effects of the Primary Skill being realized.

Evelyn slipped the ring off of her finger, and it separated into two pieces with a *click*. She realized that this must have been its true form, meant to connect one with their lover.



“Here, Zarish. This one’s for you. It’s very special, okay?”

And so, they each wore the matching rings, and Zarish returned to his former, kind personality. Under Evelyn’s blessing, peace had returned to his mind once more.

But perhaps it only served to suppress the other half of his two-sided nature. The long period they had peacefully spent together on their journey ever since was like a dream, but his vicious nature had remained lurking underneath.

Such were the events that occurred far before Team Diamond was formed. A story of the detested, ruined prince and a dark elf. The events of this story were directly connected to the present.

And so, the tale told to the jewels in the manor quietly came to an end.

§

The glass cups were well-polished, and the plates had been neatly organized on the shelves.

The lightless kitchen was completely silent, save for the sound of the wind outside. A single, moonlit flower sat on the windowsill, swaying gently in the faint wind coming in from the slightly open window. The residents of the manor knew that these flowers were an offering from the people to honor their former king.

With the dinner party and story having come to a close, the beautiful women of the so-called collection slept peacefully.

An intruder appeared, scanning their surroundings cautiously. The middle-aged man snuck in without making a sound in his filthy attire and unkempt hair.

“Urgh!”

Light suddenly filled the room, revealing the man’s surprised face. He stood there, frozen in place, and then his eyes turned toward the woman controlling the light spirit. There stood Eve the dark elf with her hand on her waist.

“Gozlov, have you been hiding all this time?”

“Yeah... A thug like me doesn’t belong in a garden full of women.” The man

named Gozlov looked troubled by the dissatisfied expression on the girl's face.

He was the one person who didn't have a ring on during Zarish's reign. He had witnessed what the women had gone through, and the abuse toward Evelyn, as well. It wouldn't have been surprising if they bore hostility toward him. That was why he had been in hiding despite being a member of the same team.

Eve sighed, then showed him the package that she had been holding in her hand.

"This is what you're looking for, right? I prepared all the leftovers and wine for you. I was wondering why the food's been going missing lately. If it was anyone else, I would've noticed right away."

"Ah, thanks! I've known you for a long time now, but you're a real catch, Eve."

Eve didn't seem to be flattered by the compliment, and she made an awkward face as she handed the bottle to Gozlov. They each pulled up a chair facing each other, and the man took a sip of the wine. It seemed to be of fine quality, and his eyes widened at the taste.

The man sighed as if memories of the old days had come flooding in. He poured the wine into a nearby glass and offered it to her out of habit from having worked with her for so long.

"Boy, how things have changed. I could hear the cheerfulness in here from all the way outside."

"Yeah, it was fun. Everyone's so full of life. I'm sure we'll accomplish a lot in the labyrinths." Evelyn clenched her fist in a gesture of determination, and wrinkles creased the man's face as he smiled. He was talking about Evelyn herself, but it seemed she didn't notice. Her healthy skin and dazzling smile were so attractive that it almost made his head spin.

Gozlov was truly surprised by the fact that Zarish's domination had come to an end and she had regained control of him. The monster that had killed everything in his path was terrifying enough that he could control Gozlov even without using a ring.

The man's breath smelled of alcohol as he proposed a question.

“So, where’s the boss man now?”

“He said he’ll be sleeping in the shed for a while. According to him, he doesn’t want to scare everyone.” The look on her face told him she felt a bit conflicted, and he made a noncommittal grunt in response. Judging by her word choice, it seemed Zarish was able to act on his own will without being ordered. When the women had been enslaved, all they had done was heed Zarish’s every word.

“Sheesh, you’ve changed. Well, that’s fine. I was worried about when the boss man would die.”

Zarish had somewhat of a self-destructive nature. Evelyn knew this and didn’t deny the comment as she sipped some wine.

“Anyway, you really surprised me, Eve. You’re not that different whether you have that ring on or not. I had no idea you were so in love with the boss man.”

“Hee hee, I might not look it, but I guess I’m single-minded like that. I just might follow him around forever.” Gozlov chuckled. He would have been thrilled to be followed around by such a lovely and attractive woman forever.

The path to destruction had vanished, leaving only this beauty. Gozlov thought that, in that sense, perhaps Zarish was happier being under control, and took another swig of wine.

§

“You seem to be awfully over-equipped for someone going to the shed.” A voice called out to Zarish as he tried to leave through the front door.

Puseri slowly revealed herself out of the darkness. The way her hair wavered like countless black roses and the cold air she expelled gave her a completely different impression from the dinner party. Her pale skin could be seen in stark contrast to her hair of twilight.

Zarish knew this was likely her true nature. Understandably, her emotions were fully exposed toward the man who had killed her family. Her eyes were full of murder, and she likely wanted to tear her despised enemy into shreds right then and there.

But someone else would have been hurt if she did so. Evelyn, who still loved

him, would suffer devastating trauma and leave the manor if Zarish was to be killed. Puseri Blackrose was the type of master who would protect others while hiding her own pain.

“Lady Puseri, I intend to fulfill my duty now,” Zarish stated concisely, and Puseri let out a small gasp. He was saying that he would go to the castle and confess to his crimes. Considering the gravity of his crimes, this was likely terrifying for him. She hesitated.

“Did Eve order you to do this?”

“No, my lady. I thought this would be for the best. For everyone, and for myself. I will explain about the ring, as well. I don’t want to drag this wonderful manor into all of this.” In other words, he intended to admit that he was the one behind the entire scheme. In a sense, the fact that they had been under the control of the ring was convenient. It would serve to prove the innocence of the women who lived at the manor.

The two stared at each other for some time in complete silence.

Puseri understood this was a dangerous situation. They were in a precarious state in which everyone, including herself, was trying to be considerate of Evelyn, yet they feared Zarish at the same time. It seemed he was the only one among them that realized the best solution.

Despite finding him detestable, there was a tiny part of her that was relieved. Perhaps, she thought, Zarish had changed after all.

“I shall accompany you. I cannot let a man walk around at night by himself.”

“Is it not usually the other way around? Oh, but I would be honored, of course.”

Puseri stood alongside Zarish, who was visibly nervous and awkward. If Zarish’s schemes that he had been secretly coordinating with the neighboring country became known, it would have dealt a heavy blow to all of Arilai. And yet, his steps didn’t waver.

He would likely undergo torture beyond description. He may have even ended up being put to death. But if he were to overcome this peril, perhaps Team Diamond could finally be reformed in earnest.

The fruit of their efforts would only come after an unfathomable amount of time and patience. And so, the two set out into the night as their first step toward that goal.

— Chapter of Diamond END —

Chapter of Midsummer, Episode 1: It's Summer in Japan, Ms. Elf

The girl repeatedly rolled over from one side to the other.

The room was lit only with indirect lighting, and they had already finished reading their picture book. They would have been fast asleep by now, but Marie continued to toss and turn in her half-sleeve pajamas.

"Can't sleep, Marie?"

"..."

I didn't have to look to know she had a dissatisfied look on her face. This was Marie's first time experiencing one of Japan's hot nights, and it would take some time to get accustomed to it, no matter how comfortable the bed itself was. To be honest, I was so used to traveling around that I could sleep no matter which region I was in.

Marie let out a sigh before sitting up in the bed. Her hair was frayed even worse than her usual bed head from having turned over so many times.

"I feel drowsy, but I can't fall asleep. Maybe the AC just isn't for me." Marie paused, then spoke weakly as she stared at the darkness in the room. An AC was on the wall, and the faint humming it emitted while expelling cold air seemed to have been disturbing her sleep.

She leaned her head on me, her eyelids heavy and her breathing slow and rhythmic as if she was already asleep. Considering she still couldn't go to sleep, perhaps the abnormal temperature was the culprit.

"You can go ahead and sleep before me. I'm sure I'll be able to once the wind quiets down a bit." Marie rubbed her eyes, speaking with a voice so faint that she sounded ready to vanish into thin air. I felt sorry for her and rubbed her back, then noticed her body was a bit warm. It seemed it wasn't regulating its temperature properly. It would have been even harder to sleep while clinging on to someone.

“No, don’t worry about me. You won’t be able to sleep with those thoughts in your mind. Why don’t you drink some cold barley tea and have a chat with me?”

Marie considered my offer for a moment, then nodded. I was deep in thought as I helped her get up. It was still the end of July, and the real heat was yet to come. I had been hearing a lot about global warming lately, and temperatures had the potential to get even higher than usual this year. Such worries occupied my mind as I opened the fridge, and the light hurt my eyes with its brightness.

As I poured the tea into a cup, I heard Marie’s voice from behind me.

“It’s okay, don’t worry about me. I might have mentioned this before, but I have a hard time falling asleep. It was especially bad back when I was in the Sorcerer’s Guild. It’s not your country’s fault.”

“Well, I don’t want you to fret either. I may not look like it, but I just love sleep. When I hear that there’s an elf who can’t sleep, it makes me want to help her from the bottom of my heart.”

I walked over to her barefoot, and she let out a light giggle. Marie sat on the bed and thanked me as she accepted the cup. She took big, thirsty gulps of the refreshing drink, then let out a satisfied sigh.

“Yes, I see what you’re trying to say. Why don’t we try to think of a way to fall asleep, rather than being overly considerate of each other? To be honest, I didn’t like the thought of you going off to the dream world without me.”

“Yeah, me too. I think it would’ve ended up just being a dream about me kicking rocks around the whole time.”

She giggled even more this time, which made me happy to see. Maybe it was because her voice was so pretty. Marie’s voice was so comforting to hear, and I just wanted to close my eyes and listen to her forever. The reason I wanted her to laugh was probably the same.

Then I noticed her purple eyes slowly narrowing... and she took me by surprise when she suddenly burst into laughter. She clutched at her sides as she laughed hysterically, and I was completely flabbergasted.

“Aha ha, I didn’t think your dream would be so boring that it would make me

laugh like this. But I'm sorry to say, such a sight would actually suit you. Oh, come on now, don't make that face. That was my way of saying I like you." I was glad the room was dark. The darkness hid my blushing face well. It was times like these when I realized how unbecoming of my age I was. I got easily flustered when she suddenly confessed her feelings for me, and my heart jumped every time she poked my shoulder with her fingertip.

I still couldn't believe it, but Mariabelle and I began dating recently.

It was like a dream come true, and it literally was in my dreams when I told her how I felt and she accepted me, so it would have probably been confusing if I tried explaining it to someone else.

And so, I was able to start dating an elf, despite being an ordinary salaryman. I met Mariabelle by chance thanks to my ability to go play in my dreams, and I happened to bring her along with me to my own country. Since then, we've been living here in the Koto Ward as our home base and visiting the dream world to go on adventures.

This may be incomprehensible for some. Even so, we'd been having an absolute blast together... Oh, and it may have been hard to believe, but that black cat curled up asleep over there was an entity known as an Arkdragon, controlled by a black-haired beauty who was over level 1,000. And that girl holding back her laughter was actually an elf that was over a hundred years old, but none of this was strange if you considered our connection to the dream world. In short, we had been enjoying such chance meetings and the lifestyle we had now.

"Ahh, that was hilarious. You really are a strange person. Why would you be kicking rocks for that long?" I wanted to tell her it wasn't meant to be taken literally, but it seemed she could clearly picture me kicking rocks in her mind. As I admired her imagination, I felt her poke me with her finger.

"I'm wide awake after all that laughing. Say, don't you think now would be a good time to try that thing?"

"Hm? What thing?"

"Manipulating heat of vaporization. You told me about it several times in Arilai, remember? The theory that you can absorb heat from your skin with

evaporation. Maybe we'll be able to sleep through this awful heat with the help of spirits." She pointed, and the sound of a fish splashing could be heard. In fact, something that looked very much like a fish appeared and began swimming around the room; it was the water spirit, Undine. Marie then picked up the remote with her other hand and turned off the AC for some reason.

"Regulate the humidity in this room for us for a while. This would be more like dehumidification than vaporization. But it should make it at least somewhat easier to sleep."

I heard a splashing sound after Marie gave her order, and then I felt the sweat drying off of my skin. The heat was removed from my body along with the sweat, and I felt just a bit more comfortable than before. Then, I remembered. We were able to live through the excessively humid rainy season thanks to that water spirit working full-time.

"Next, we'll have to take care of the room temperature. Let's hold a strategy meeting. I have tomorrow off, so we can arm ourselves with knowledge on how to cool down. Why don't we visit the electronics store or the library? I want to teach you the proper way to spend the summer."

"Yes, good idea. I can't become a proper sorceress if I just give up on things because I assume it's impossible. We'll use everything we can, including that water spirit, and spend our summer in comfort."

It seemed there was a lot of humidity to take care of as the water spirit just got to work, and it busily flew around the room. It gathered moisture around its body and flew over to the sink to dispose of the water, which looked like a lot of work.

I watched the spirit for some time, then heard a yawn. My gaze returned to Marie to find her covering her mouth as if trying to hide her yawn. We decided to go to bed in preparation for tomorrow's strategy meeting.

I moved closer to her, and she surrendered both hands to me. Her face told me she was just starting to have some fun, but I supported her back and thighs with my arms and gently lifted her up. She wrapped her arms around my neck, and I smelled the faint scent of her sweat.

"When I first met you, I had absolutely no idea I would be dating you

someday. Your face was just so forgettable. I hated humans to begin with, and you chased after me while naked.” Marie whispered in my ear quietly. There was a bit of sleepiness in her voice, and she sounded like she was enjoying the automatic lift to the bed. The gentle whispers from the girl that was as light as a feather were making my own eyelids feel heavy.

I moved the blanket aside and placed her on the bed. The bed creaked as I laid her down, and her purple eyes were directed at me the entire time. Just as I pulled up the blanket to tuck her in, Marie spoke to me.

“I didn’t think you would end up becoming unforgettable to me either. I mean, just listening to you talk makes me sleepy... Well, good night. Let’s go have fun at the electronics store tomorrow...”

I almost informed her that we weren’t going out to play, but instead to have a strategy meeting, but she was barely able to keep her eyes open. I whispered good night, then got into bed myself. Soon after flipping off the lights, I would be wrapped in comfortable blankets and heading into dreamland.

I snuggled up to the sleeping elf’s back, her faintly sweet scent enveloping me as I drifted off. The last thing I heard was a light splash.

§

Elementary schoolers who had just started their summer vacations passed by beside me. Their uniforms were dazzlingly bright in the sun, and their voices were cheerful as they talked to each other. It was the weekend, so they were likely on the way to their clubs.

I didn’t appreciate this until after I’d graduated, but their cheery expressions always made me envious. This was a time when they were given minimal homework, and they could spend the rest of their time doing whatever they wanted. They could play without worrying about the critical eyes of others. This was a privilege that only students like them had.

The sun burned the asphalt, a heat haze wavering on the other side of the street. Ultraviolet rays came down from the blue skies, and it felt like they were piercing my skin. Summer had officially come to the Kanto region.

I didn’t like summer very much. In fact, I didn’t like it at all. Not too long ago, I

probably would have avoided this heat and snuck back into my room. Then, I would have spent my time in comfort thanks to the greatest invention in human history: air conditioning.

“Sooo hot! I can’t believe this!” But seeing Marie raise both fists in protest, I thought that maybe walking around outside during the summer wasn’t so bad.

With giant columns of clouds as her background, she was wearing a ribboned dress with exposed shoulders and the woven sandals with thick soles that she had bought recently. With her hair tied to either side, her fantastical facial features and smooth skin, and her round eyes looking right at me, she was so cute that I could have stared at her forever.

Well, I admit I was buying too many clothes. But Marie looked good in any outfit, and she seemed so happy whenever I bought her new ones, so it was difficult for me to keep myself from opening up my wallet.

“This is unbelievable. Are Japan’s summers always like this? I can feel the clammy heat rising up from below. Look, I can’t stop sweating.” Mariabelle looked rather amused as she complained and grabbed the hem of her skirt, then flapped it around to fan herself.

Her skin was exposed under the harsh sunlight, naturally drawing stares from those around her. But it seemed Marie was already used to getting looks from strangers by now. She simply picked up her partner, the black cat, and they both turned their eyes toward me.

It seemed Marie really didn’t get tan, though I already knew this from our time in the desert. Maybe species that lived long lives, like elves, were fundamentally different from us humans. Such were my thoughts as I spoke to her.

“Are you surprised? You might end up hating Japan if I told you the temperatures haven’t even gotten bad yet.”

“I don’t know about that, but it really does feel strange. Maybe it’s the humidity, but it doesn’t feel like the usual Koto Ward. I feel like I’d turn into a steamed dish if you sprinkle some salt on me. Arilai might even be easier to live in, compared to how things are now.” It was much less humid over there, after all. Arilai’s heat was very dry, so one could get by as long as they avoided the

sun. Meanwhile, here in Japan, the high humidity made it muggy like a sauna, and hiding under a shade didn't provide much relief.

The black fur on the cat made the heat substantially more uncomfortable, and it leaped out of Marie's arms to avoid her sweating body. But Wridra jumped up from the hot asphalt upon landing and let out a displeased yowl before hiding in our shadow. I noted that staying home was an option, but the cat only stuck out a pink tongue at me in response.

Now, there was a reason Marie wasn't complaining much, despite her hatred of the heat. Oh, she had been complaining earlier, but that was nothing compared to when we went to the desert. I could clearly feel her loathing then, and Wridra had gone home right away.

One of the reasons Marie was able to cope was the open ice box on the roadside, which was packed with frozen treats. The elf and black cat narrowed their eyes in a smile as the cool air soothed them, and they looked kind of like sisters across different species in my eyes.

I purchased the items they each pointed at, and then we decided to sit on a shaded bench while I taught them how to enjoy the summer.

"Mmm, it's so cold and sweet! I vowed that soft serve was the one and only kind of ice cream for me, but I'll have to reconsider now. Very interesting." Marie looked rather serious as she made her comment, then used her spoon to stab her ice cream, which included lemon slices. The black cat sitting next to her was munching away at its own icy treat, then suddenly shut its eyes, as if hit with a headache.

"Is this the correct way to spend the summer that you mentioned? To stay put and figure out how to cool off while having fun?"

"That's right. You eat cold food or things that are in season and hang out in cool places like libraries or shops. As long as you're looking for fun things to do, summer isn't all that bad." I didn't think I would be the one saying this, considering I once hated the summer myself.

Marie had stopped sweating once she cooled down, and she sat there balancing her thick-soled sandals on her toes. Cicadas were crying all over the city, and the elf looked around to enjoy the foreign scenery. The shopping

district was somewhat deserted, but there was a certain elegance to the sight of it. An expanse of vivid blue skies and mass of clouds could be seen overhead, and the wind chimes sounding off nearby added to the tasteful scene.

Marie's airy, wide-sleeved dress complimented her fantastical charm exquisitely. The simple embroidery was a nice accent for her beautiful skin, and her eyes like precious stones made my heart jump as they met my gaze. I worried whether she realized I had been staring at her, but then she asked me something that was completely unrelated.

"Kazuhiro-san, is it true you received a bonus?"

"Hm? Yeah. Don't tell anyone, but I'm a little rich right now, so I might be able to grant your wish as long as it isn't too crazy."

Maybe the way I said it like it was some big secret was comical, because she giggled in response. She definitely stood out, but it was because she was just so lovely. Strangers smiled as they passed by, enjoying a bit of her distinct charm for that moment. In that brief amount of time, perhaps they were able to forget about the awful heat.



“I like going shopping. But our objective here is to sleep comfortably at night in this heat, so this is a sort of reconnaissance mission at the electronics store. I will get to the bottom of how those air conditioners work today.” Marie really must have hated the discomfort while trying to sleep last night, because she made a fist with a determined expression on her face. She got really fired up when it came to resolving her own issues, and spirit users were incredibly reliable at times like these.

I was rather thankful for this proposition. Controlling spirits was a supernatural feat from the viewpoint of someone living in the present age, and I already knew her abilities were useful for living in comfort from the time I lived in the elven village during the rainy season. Fortunately, our stance was that it was fine to use as long as people didn’t find out.

She seemed satisfied by the ice cream, and she swung her feet back to gain momentum and hopped off of the bench. Marie then extended her hand toward me, and I took it naturally.

“Then it’s time to start our fun little electronics store date,” I said.

“Hee hee, just you wait. I’m going to steal their top-secret machinery.” She flashed an audacious smile, and I couldn’t help but burst out in laughter. I noted how cute Marie was, and she seemed rather satisfied as she said “Is that so?” Maybe I was imagining it, but Marie seemed to be in a good mood as we walked toward the station department store.

We passed through the shopping district and saw the giant department store in front of Kinshicho Station. My bonus pay was meager enough to be that of a rookie employee, but I decided to use it to grant Marie’s wish.

The department store in front of Kinshicho Station was quite spacious, and there were many shops lined up there. The electronics store was especially big, and it had three separate floors divided by purpose. It was full of customers, as expected on a weekend, and there was a wide range of people, from children and their parents to young people, shopping alone.

“Ah, ah, ah, ah, ahhh...” The cute girl vibrating in the massage chair drew stares from all around us. The black cat stared enviously out of the basket on

my lap, and Marie used the chair to dig deeper into her hips, back, and even the ankles, as if to show off.

“Hmhm, it’s too bad, Wridra. If only you were in human form, you could have experienced this incredible massage chair... Ahh, no way... My shoulders, too?! Mm, mmph!” The elf girl squirmed around as she enjoyed the new model massage chair. I was watching and smiling from a chair next to her, but my eyes bulged when I looked at the price tag. It cost so much that I wished I hadn’t seen it.

This was bad. The price was so high that it would have obliterated my bonus pay. I did say I would grant her a small wish, but the joy I got from getting my bonus would have vanished on the first day if she wanted this massage chair. I gulped, then tentatively spoke to her.

“Wh-What do you think, Marie? It probably doesn’t feel that good if your shoulders aren’t that stiff.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say so. Just look at these specs. It calculates the skeletal structure of your body and massages it in the most optimal way possible. How terrifying. There are many other massage chairs, but I don’t think any of them can do your shoulders so thoroughly... Nnf, mmph, it’s tickling me!” Marie held in her laughter as she vibrated some more.

It seemed she had regained her energy from being indoors with the AC blasting, and she continued to enjoy the sensation of her hips being massaged. The price tag reflected its top-of-the-line specs, and it continued to make fine adjustments as it focused on her lower back. Marie seemed to enjoy this, and as the chair continued working her, a realization suddenly hit her.

“Oh, wow! Look, it says core stretches! I wonder what it’s going to do... Ah! Wha, hey! Wait, my body is stretching!” The elf squealed in joy as her body got stretched out. I was getting worried that she would be defeated by this piece of Japanese household electronics, but all I could do was watch nervously. The automatic massage course finally seemed to end, and it whirled back into its original position.

“I’m sorry, what were we talking about again?” Marie seemed rather out of it, and she had a blank look in her eyes as she spoke. Her cheeks were faintly pink,

and her eyelids looked a bit heavy. I groaned internally, mentally noting that the latest model of massage chairs was expensive enough to wipe out my bonus for a reason, considering it had the ability to leave Marie in such a state.

In any case, I decided to help Marie in her totally relaxed condition. I reached out my hand, and she weakly squeezed it before pulling herself up. It seemed she really had nearly fallen asleep, and she struggled to get her sandals back on.

“I suppose I slightly underestimated it. I’m ashamed to admit, I thought it might be nice to have one at home.” Marie groaned as she rubbed her hip. She looked as if she couldn’t admit defeat, for the honor of all elves. The cowlick on her head matched her expression.

“Hm, I think massage chairs originated in Japan. I heard they’re especially nice after a hot bath. Come to think of it, they were at the hot springs in Aomori, too.” Marie’s purple eyes widened.

“What, really? I thought they were just big chairs! Ahh, darn it! I definitely want to try it next time!” Even the black cat turned this way with a shocked expression. They had to be colluding to make me laugh. I couldn’t contain it anymore and burst out laughing, and then they looked at me, looking confused.

Fortunately, Marie didn’t ask for the massage chair. This was a great relief, considering I was just a humble salaryman. She explained why on our way to the appliance section on the same floor.

“Of course I didn’t want it. It felt really nice, but we couldn’t possibly buy something so expensive. Don’t you agree, Wridra?” But the black cat inside the basket just blinked as if it didn’t understand why. That look meant “I want one!” It seemed I had developed the ability to read what cats were thinking through facial expressions alone.

Now, electronics stores were full of things that would be of interest for these two.

There were electric pots that dispensed hot water with a push of a button, a garbage treating machine that recycled garbage into compost, a toaster that could make toast, fried eggs, and coffee all at once, a vegetable chopper that cut vegetables up into tiny pieces in moments, and more. The elf and black cat

were in awe as they busily went from one appliance to another.

“Woow, this is amazing. You could cook things so quickly with these!”

“There are so many kinds of electronics these days. I was living alone before, so I didn’t really come look at the kitchen appliances. It just felt like food tasted better when using a kitchen knife. I don’t know why, but you tend to admire coffee brewers when you live alone. I still use the toaster to this day, but the coffee machine was a pain to maintain, so I even forgot where I put it sometimes.”

“Wouldn’t it be nice to have appliances like these at a new place?”

“It would! Seeing all these appliances here makes me want to get some. When we went to the Alexei Region, all I brought was some shoes and a brush. The food was made in batches in the kitchen, so staying in the upper floor was torture. It reeked of noinoi the whole time.” Her expression turned sour as she recalled the smell of noinoi, which was a food similar to onions. It was useful because they were easy to grow, but the taste and smell turned awful because of the lack of long-term storage technology. Even after my journeys over many years, I still couldn’t tell if they were rotten, or if they just smelled bad naturally.

Then, I noticed Marie looking confused as she observed a hot plate with several round grooves in it for cooking takoyaki.

“But noinoi are pretty tasty when they’re in season. I’d like you to experience how delicious in-season vegetables can be. Then I’m sure you wouldn’t be picky about food if you did.” I could almost hear Marie’s heart skip a beat. She said she didn’t know what I was talking about and tried to play it off, running her hand through her hair while averting her eyes. I smiled at her, undeterred by her brusque reply.

“Summer vegetables are really tasty. It’ll help you fight off fatigue from the summer heat, and they’re full of nutrients. Why don’t we have some summer vegetables for dinner tonight? There are eggplants, pumpkins, and many others.”

Marie hesitated. “I don’t like vegetables very much after spending time at the Sorcerer’s Guild. They just taste acrid and bitter, and it makes me feel like a bug

eating them.” Her excitement from earlier had plummeted, and her voice was basically as quiet as a whisper.

“Hm,” I mused to myself.

I suspected something was up from the way she often left her vegetables uneaten, but it was still surprising. Elves mainly ate crops from nature, so it wouldn’t have surprised me if many of them were vegetarians. Not to mention, she loved eating fruits.

“Eating vegetables is part of the proper way of spending the summer. If you don’t like it, it can just be a one-time thing for tonight. So why don’t you give it a try? I’ll do my best to make it good.” Marie groaned. She made a sour face as she deliberated the idea, which made it very obvious just how much she didn’t care for vegetables. Eventually, she sighed in resignation.

“Okay, just this once. As long as I don’t have to eat them after it’s all over.” Hearing Marie’s curtness made me groan in response. I wanted to tell her that wasn’t okay, mainly because I wanted her to be healthy, at least while I was with her. I had a responsibility to take care of her while we were together, after all. But I didn’t want to force her to do anything she didn’t want to do, so I was in a difficult position.

“Okay, I won’t make any vegetable dishes unless you specifically ask for some.”

“Then it’s a deal. I’ll try to endure it for tonight.”

We both wore tense smiles as we shook on it. I wanted to make some delicious vegetable dishes for her and get her to see them in a different light. The thought occupied my mind as we walked around the air-conditioned floor.

Just then, I noticed Marie was curiously staring at a fan.

Her airy dress was lifted up by the air, revealing her thighs, so I stood behind her to prevent passersby from seeing anything. I had the thought that maybe she should have been a bit more aware of her surroundings.

“Are you interested in that fan?”

“My, this is an amazing invention. It continuously spins at a set pace... It’s like

magic. Machines truly excel at making precise movements like this.”

I realized that she was more interested in relatively simple devices like these. Older fans used to be bulkier and heavier, but the modern ones mainly had cleaner designs. Marie narrowed her eyes happily as the wind blew against her.

“Oh, it’s so cheap compared to the other items.”

“That’s because it doesn’t make the air cooler, but just circulates it instead. It looks like those ones also have air cooling functions.” I pointed to a rather strange-looking product. It was a big panel that showed details for the electronics with diagrams and cute-looking illustrations.

“Wow, this is nice. It displays how the appliance works, like a research project. I wonder if they just put it out for summer vacation. Oh, and by research project, I mean homework that’s given to grade schoolers where they look into a topic they’re interested in and report on it when they get back from summer vacation.”

“Hm, they make children do strange things in this world. A vacation is for resting. If they’re still forced to study on vacation, just when are they supposed to get some rest?”

I nodded in agreement. It wasn’t just students that had homework. Some people brought work home with them if they couldn’t finish in time. Everyone should have at least gotten to rest while they were on break. I told Marie just that, but her eyes were darting around, and it seemed she wasn’t paying attention.

“Hm? What is it, Marie?”

“Oh, it’s just that I felt like I was forgetting something important. I thought we came to the electronics store for a specific purpose...” I cocked my head, trying to recall if she was right. We didn’t have any homework or work, so we should have been able to enjoy the weekend freely. I looked around as I thought about it.

The comforting cold air hit me in the large home appliances section, where ACs and dehumidifiers were on display. The prices ranged from cheap to expensive, the items in the higher range rivaling the price tag on the fancy

massage chair from earlier.

After staring at them blankly for some time, we both spoke at once.

“Oh, the AC.”

“G-Goodness, we completely forgot about our original purpose,” Marie said.

“Even I forgot about it... Hmm, there are so many unusual things in an electronics store that you tend to forget what you came for while looking around.”

“Yes, I think that thing is especially to blame. The massage chair that nearly put me to sleep. I’m sure it was put there to serve the same purpose as traps in dungeons.” She spoke with a severe face, as if she was a detective revealing an elaborate trick, but... I’d forgotten about it, too. Still, I decided not to correct her. I acted impressed and left it at that.

In any case, it was convenient for us that the mechanisms of the air conditioner were on display.

I cleared my throat, and Marie looked at the big screen. Being the brilliant elf she was, Marie intended to learn how to read and write Japanese as well, so she often read books and wrote kanji in her spare time. I only had to support her here and there when she couldn’t read something, and she understood how air conditioners worked after reading through the explanation.

“Hmm, what an interesting concept. To think that warm air contains more humidity than cold air. Cooling the air makes it so it can’t contain the humidity anymore, so it turns into water droplets... I see, so it’s like the way liquid forms on a cup of cold water.” It seemed Marie was actually enjoying this.

But it wasn’t too surprising when I considered that she was trying to become a wizard. Wizards tended to be unusual individuals who established their own theories to reach their objective, even if others claimed it would be impossible. In this world, inventors were the closest thing to an equivalent.

“Huh, I thought the dehumidifiers in air conditioners were cold, but I guess it’s because it works by cooling air to gather moisture. Come to think of it, it wasn’t as cold when the water spirit dehumidified the air for us,” I noted.

“That reminds me of Arilai. The dry air isn’t as uncomfortable, but it doesn’t necessarily change the temperature. Hmm, I didn’t think I’d have so much fun coming here. I like this world because it’s not bound by outdated ways of thinking,” Marie said as she stood on her toes to get a look at something higher up. Her eyes were sparkling with fascination, and I was surprised by just how enthralled she was. Then, she pointed her finger.

“There it is! A method of cooling the room. This must be the principle of the great modern invention, the air conditioner.” Marie smiled like a cat that had captured its prey. The big panel displayed an illustration showing how to direct heat outside.

Lines began to fill her notebook for Japanese studies. Marie was using her favorite writing tool to create those lines, and they illustrated a duct connecting the room to the outside with air circulating between them.

“So, that means heat is drawn to things that are cold. The ice cream we ate during the day was very tasty, and it also felt very cold. It felt that way because heat was being removed from my body.” Marie opened her mouth to demonstrate.

We were back in my room. After accomplishing our goal of figuring out how air conditioners worked, I was practically dragged out of the store to take us back. Marie’s face was slightly flushed, and her expression said that she wanted to test out her theory immediately. Meanwhile, I had great expectations for her discovery and listened like a diligent student. Maybe she could do something about this heat after all.

“Yes, I get that, but...” I stared at the box in front of me as I spoke. Despite its hefty size, it was actually on the cheaper end of electronic home appliances. I did promise to grant her a small wish after getting my bonus, but I was taken aback when she requested something so inexpensive.

Sweat poured down my face. It wasn’t that I was nervous, surprised, or afraid. It was just that... the room was abnormally hot.

“So, why aren’t we turning on the AC?”

“If it was cool in here to begin with, we wouldn’t be able to tell if it’s working

or not. I'll have you know I'm putting my honor as an elf on the line for this experiment," Marie said with a dignified look on her face.

I had been reaching toward the AC's remote, but I had no choice but to retract my hand.

My room in this mid-summer weather was one of the most unpleasant environments to be in. The air was muggy due to the windows being closed, which wasn't surprising, considering it had been baking in the sun for so many hours. It even felt harder to breathe, but to my surprise, Marie took the remote from me, despite hating the heat more than I did.

Her bangs were stuck to her forehead with sweat, but she flipped them up with her finger and pointed to the sky. Moments later, something strange appeared. She had conjured a cloud of what looked like the vapor that came from dry ice, and it floated in the air. Marie had summoned a spirit, a being that could have basically been compared to a paranormal phenomenon.

"Whoa, it's like a jellyfish. I sense cold air coming from it, too. Is this an ice spirit, by any chance?" I asked.

"Correct. I called Frau the ice spirit, so we have our base for our AC."

Honestly, I was surprised. Electronics used technology that even I didn't understand, and she had come from a civilization that was far less developed than ours. My eyes widened, and Marie grinned.

"Like I said, this is just the base. We're not done yet. As I mentioned before, heat is drawn to cold, so when this ice spirit goes outside, the heat will follow. After that, we just need to dispense the heat outside and repeat the process. Then, the system will be complete."

After a period of silence, I finally replied, "Huh." Her explanation was too scientific for my imagination to keep up. And of course, the awful weather creating heat hazes was taking a toll on me, too. Marie stood, then smiled as she placed a hand on my chest.

"Now, it's time for an experiment. Over in this world, I can only manage one spirit at most. Not to mention, they can't just repeat one motion forever like a machine. But ultimately, if we can cool this room down, we win. This summer

and those sweltering nights would become much more comfortable. Now, come here.” This was quite curious. I didn’t expect to be doing a science experiment with an elf girl. Marie took my hand in one of her own and called over the ice spirit with her free hand. She was humming as if she was thoroughly enjoying this, and she led us over to...

“The bathroom? Why’d you bring us here?”

“We’re going to supplement what’s lacking with something else. This is something I learned with you.” The time we had conquered the ancient labyrinth immediately came to mind. We were greatly outnumbered, but we used our wit and strategy to put up a fight. This was probably what she was talking about.

Marie gave a word of encouragement, and the jellyfish-like ice spirit gently drifted through the air. It responded to the elf girl’s request and touched the surface of the water pooled in the bathtub.

After some time, I looked over at Marie. No change had occurred, and I had no idea what exactly the ice spirit had done. Her pale purple eyes met mine, and she looked like she could barely contain the desire to spill a secret. Judging by her expression, it seemed the experiment hadn’t failed.

And so, I looked back over to the bathtub. There were many small, round, foot-like appendages coming out of the ice spirit, and each of them were continuously making fine movements. The spirit’s transparent appearance made me feel like the temperature was getting cooler just from looking at it. Just then, I felt cold air touch my skin.

“Now it’s your turn. It’s a bit heavy, but you can do it,” Marie said to me after glancing at the ice spirit that moved away from the water’s surface.

I wondered what she meant by that. She gestured for me to lift something, so maybe she wanted me to put the water in a bucket and carry it out? I considered this thought as I touched the water, then felt how cold it was.

Something else caught my attention. I heard a *thunk* from the bathtub. It sounded like something had hit it, but when I moved my hand around to check, I noticed something cold, hard, and invisible there. I was a bit taken aback, but when I got a hold of it and pulled it out of the water, a transparent block of ice

broke the surface with a splash.

“It’s ice!”

“Yes, ice. It contains very little heat, so it draws a massive amount of heat from its surroundings. Now, please carry that over to the other room. And look how clean of a shape that ice is. You’re quite a wonderful spirit, aren’t you?” With that, she appreciatively booped the ice spirit with a fingertip. The spirit looked pleased as it floated around, then followed Marie as she walked out of the bathroom.

Now, our little experiment, which was akin to a summer vacation research project, was approaching its final stages.

The ice block I was carrying this way and that was about ten kilograms in weight. I had wrapped the rectangular block with a bath towel to make sure I didn’t drop it. I brought the about five water bottles’ worth of ice over to the room, and Marie prepared the next step. She was opening the box we had purchased from earlier, and there was a tray laid on the floor...

The fan whirled to life. The cold air blowing out of it was a blessing in this horrid heat, and I couldn’t help but let out a cry of relief.

“Ohh, that feels nice!” It was the natural reaction considering we were in here with closed windows and no air conditioning on a hot summer day.

The sweat that had been pouring out of us stopped right away, and we narrowed our eyes at the sensation of cold air against our skin. It seemed Marie wanted to feel more of it. She grabbed the hem of her dress and revealed her pale thighs. She let out a delighted squeal, but the light fabric floated up behind her, and I quickly looked away as her exposed butt nearly came into view.

Marie’s hair danced in the cool air, and she looked back at me with a smile on her face.

“My explanation was a bit long-winded, but this is what I wanted to say. Add wind to ice, and you get some refreshing, cold air. See how the surface of the ice is melting?” She beckoned me over, and I moved my face next to the smug looking elf’s. I could see the water droplets running down the ice’s surface.

Marie poked it with her fingertip.

“Just like how we sweat, ice that gets hit with wind loses its chill through evaporation. That wind feels cold to us because invisible specks of water remove heat by touching our skin and evaporating.” She smiled happily as she explained while sitting on the floor. There was joy in her amethyst eyes, her long hair fluttering in front of her.

She then pointed into the air again. Her finger danced in circles, and the water spirit that had helped us the other night appeared again. A splash resounded in the room, and then the ice spirit faded away, as if it had tagged out with the other spirit.

“I’m still bad at controlling spirits in this world. My summons are limited to the ice spirit, which is easygoing and quick to fall asleep, and the water spirit, which loves to swim around. But there won’t be any issues as long as I assign roles to each of them and have them take turns working. And from this point on, I just need to apply my method of removing heat through evaporation. Look.”

I looked as instructed and saw that the water spirit was gently swimming around the room with its tailfin. It looked like a semi-transparent fish, and it gathered water onto its surface as it went around the four corners of the room. The spirit was tasked with gathering all of the excess moisture in the area.

“I’m having it collect all of the excess moisture that’s holding heat, then discard that moisture in the drain. Just like the drainage hose of an air conditioner. Hmhm, what do you think? You can feel free to praise me.” Her eyes were sparkling in anticipation as she ran her fingers through her long hair. I could feel the temperature dropping even as I sat there, mouth agape, so she was obviously right. All I could do, of course, was pat her on the head.

“Mmf, hmhm, that tickles! You’re going a bit overboard with the head pats here. It may be true that I’m an extremely rare Spirit Sorceress who can even replicate modern inventions, but is it really that big a deal?”

“Yeah, it is! I always knew you were smart, but I had no idea how smart. You’re incredibly cute, too, and you can take care of things around the house and create amazing inventions. Soon, I’ll have to start calling you Lady

Mariabelle to give you the respect you deserve.” Marie’s long ears drooped slightly. I went all out when it came to giving compliments, and it was fun seeing her dreamy expression. Even more so when she blushed and looked at me with her brilliant eyes. Her head moved from side to side as she pleaded “Again, again!” and I appreciated how cute girls could be from the bottom of my heart.

It was officially mid-summer as the end of July arrived, and the temperatures had reached a sweltering 35 degrees Celsius.

Japan was a country with extremely high humidity, and days like these were unpleasant even for those who lived in the desert. But our room was so pleasant that it was hard to believe it was the middle of summer, and it was unlikely that we would have trouble sleeping like we had the previous night. Seeing Marie so excited gave me a feeling that this summer would be more fun than ever before.

Chapter of Midsummer, Episode 2: Let's Eat Summer Vegetables

Clouds drifted in the reddening skies outside of the window. I was surprised to realize that the day was already ending.

I recalled that it had been quite a busy day of walking around and sweating a lot as I removed my shoes.

The fan was diligently working, even while we left to get some ingredients for dinner, and we were greeted with a pleasant breeze as we entered the room. The black cat that was lazing about wasn't watching the house in our absence; it was just there as a result of refusing to leave the room so it could take a nap. I still hadn't quite adjusted to seeing the semi-transparent jellyfish floating around in the room.

Marie poked her head under my armpit and looked up.

"Oh, look, the spirit is still working. That's good. It seems like there aren't any issues even if I'm away from it for a short while. The ice spirit is very easygoing and likes to sleep often, so you can poke it gently if it stops moving."

"I guess it's different from managing an AC or other appliances if you can manage by poking it..."

"Of course it is," Marie laughed as she removed her ear covers, revealing her characteristic long elf ears. She then walked over to the fan to cool off the sweat on her skin.

"Ahh, that's nice! Hee hee, it's nice not having to worry about the electricity bill. I couldn't stop thinking about it when we had the AC running all day." Marie flapped her skirt as she spoke. I turned around, and then it hit me. The electricity cost of keeping the place cool had pretty much been reduced to zero.

"What? But we were spending like 5,000 yen a month before!"

"Oh, you just realized it? This should help alleviate some of the cost of living,

and this is what they call eco-friendly, right?”

Really, I hadn't seen such an eco-friendly air conditioner in my life. I couldn't help but feel surprised and impressed, and I walked over to place the shopping bags on the floor. Ordinary vegetables one could find at any supermarket came rolling out of them as I did so.

A hand reached over from beside me and picked up one of the vegetables, and then a pair of purple eyes inspected it. The look in Marie's eyes wasn't one of curiosity, but instead seemed to say “Why do vegetables even exist?” She hesitated.

“I was looking forward to dinner, but to think it's going to be full of vegetables... I think I'm going to cry,” she said.

“Now, now. Summer veggies are really good. Vegetables in season are especially packed full of nutrients. Didn't your mother scold you for hating vegetables?” I asked, and Marie let out a big sigh while maintaining her staring contest with the vegetable. The memory of getting scolded must have replayed in her mind.

“Then, just as we promised...”

“Yup, I won't make any vegetable dishes without your approval,” I replied right away to reassure her. Marie blinked, seemingly taken aback by my lack of protest. I didn't want to force her to eat anything she didn't want to, and I could always have balanced out nutrients with other food.

“My, aren't you confident? Do you have some sort of secret plan, perhaps?”

“Hm? Nope. I'm just going to cook normally so you can enjoy some food.” I added that it was for the sake of a vegetable-hating elf, and Marie made a non-committal sound and stared at me dubiously. I could tell she had her guard up, and I hurriedly began the prep work.

I turned on the water, and Marie came up to me while putting on her apron. The jellyfish floated up behind its master, and I wondered if it was curious about cooking made by a barbaric human like me. Marie's shoulder gently pressed against mine, and she moved me in front of the cutting board. It seemed she wanted to split up our tasks.

“Vegetables in this country certainly do have pretty colors and shapes. They have a luster to them. They must be very well maintained.” Marie stared at the vegetables, impressed, and began washing them thoroughly. Then, she handed me a big, tasty-looking eggplant.

“Eggplants have been loved in this country since the old days. At first, only a select few influential people were even allowed to eat them. Once they became available to the common people, they quickly spread throughout Japan because of how good they tasted. They were modified over time to improve their flavor and yield, and now, eventually, they’ve ended up here in front of you,” I explained as I cut into the eggplant. I wanted Marie to become interested in vegetables, and I genuinely thought the in-season eggplant looked delicious. She stared at me as I cut smaller slices into the vegetable to make sure it would cook evenly, but it seemed she still hadn’t let her guard down.

“I suppose you ended up hating vegetables because of your time in the Sorcerer’s Guild?” I asked.

“Yes, it’s because the smell of boiling noinoi had seeped into my room from the kitchen. I was fine with it at first, but after a month, I was having nightmares about them. A noinoi appeared next to my pillow and intimidated me into eating it. It’s unforgivable. According to my roommate at the time, I was groaning about the smell and the bitterness in my sleep. You probably would have hated it too in such an environment.” Marie then handed me an onion, which was very similar to a noinoi. She narrowed her eyes at me, as if to say, “I can’t believe you’d put such a thing on our dinner table.”

I cut the onions into rings as I considered this. She must have hated vegetables so much because of trauma from her past. In my opinion, Marie was a bit unusual for an elf. She loved sweets and meat, and she had no interest in other food, like vegetables. But it wasn’t that she hated them completely. Simmered dishes and salads that didn’t have the smell of raw veggies didn’t seem to bother her. She had even asked me to make hot pot repeatedly.

“So not all hope is lost. Oh, don’t mind me. Just talking to myself. You didn’t go back to the elven forest even in such a horrible environment, huh? Is that because you really wanted to be a wizard?”

“Yes. I couldn’t just go home without accomplishing my goal of becoming a wizard. Aja the Great is just about the only wizard in Arilai, and he always surprised me with his mastery of Magic Tools and creative ideas. My teacher at the guild was also very kind, and I respected both of them greatly.” Marie suddenly seemed to remember something. Her hands stopped washing vegetables, and her purple eyes turned to me.

“I forgot to mention this, but our merits in clearing the second floor were recognized, and I was told that I could be promoted to an Advanced Sorceress as long as I passed an exam.”

I nearly responded with a lighthearted “Oh, that’s nice,” but then my eyes widened. Only a select few highly talented magic users were permitted to become a Sorceress, and Marie was already an extremely rare class, being a Spirit Sorceress. This meant that she was going to move up to an even higher class.

“So you’re one step closer to becoming a wizard, then. I was just enjoying my time in the ancient labyrinth, but I’m glad I was able to be of use.”

“It was the same for me. I hate to admit it, but it’s true. I got to eat so much delicious food, and we got to stay at a luxurious manor recently. We even went fishing on the second floor. I wonder if I really deserve to be promoted like this. I’ve been putting off the exam because it was weighing heavy on my mind.” Marie let out a deep sigh. It felt like a strange thing to be worried about.

But an Advanced Sorceress, huh...? I wondered what kind of benefits came with being promoted. Being oblivious about the inner structure of the Sorcerer’s Guild, I asked Marie that very question. She looked up at the ceiling and thought it over for a moment.

“Advancing in rank does come with many perks. First of all, there’s an increase in salary, but I’ve been getting paid plenty lately, so that’s not the important part.”

She was right. We had put in so much work that Arilai had paid us in platinum coins, so a salary increase didn’t feel like much of a benefit. We didn’t have too much to spend it on anyway, and although Marie did want to be wealthy, an Advanced Sorceress’s salary wasn’t nearly enough to attain that goal.

“I’d also get the right to access the archives, which is said to be a treasure trove of knowledge. But personally, I like the libraries here more. I would also get my own personal room, but the Manor of Black Roses was far more comfortable, so...” Marie stopped in the middle of her explanation. She seemed to be deep in thought with a vegetable still in her grip, then looked at me with a curious expression.

“For some reason, I just got the feeling that becoming an Advanced Sorceress doesn’t really matter. How strange. I’d been trying too hard until now, thinking I’d be able to go shopping and enjoy tasty food if I just increased my salary...”

“Maybe because we’ve been shopping and eating good food all this time? Like I mentioned before, we’ve been spending all our time playing around in the other world.”

Marie blinked, then let out an “Ah!” She had just remembered that ever since we moved our home base to Arilai, we’d been staying at a noble manor, and we’d also been eating delicious food and sweets in Japan. Such desires would naturally wane after living a lifestyle like that.

“I feel like I’ll end up getting corrupted into a dark elf someday,” Marie noted.

“I wouldn’t exactly call ours a humble lifestyle. Though, I think we’re living pretty modestly here in Japan, at least. After all, my lifestyle is as ordinary as you can get.” I realized we had finished the prep work. Water was dripping from the basket full of washed vegetables. I had stocked a few each of in-season eggplants, pumpkin, asparagus, shishito peppers, bell peppers, and shiso leaves. The onions I had bought were there just because I liked onions.

The pumpkin I had bought already came cut into quarters, so I just had to scoop out the seeds and slice it into smaller pieces. On tonight’s menu was summer vegetable tempura, as was apparent by the oil I was preparing. Marie appeared wearing a head wrap on her head and was ready to learn another foreign dish.

“It’s easy for tempura to end up too soggy, so it’s pretty hard to make. That’s why I don’t make it often, but since we are, I wanna make sure it comes out good.”

“Oh? What makes it so hard? Is it the seasoning?” It was actually the

temperature management. The ideal temperature varied by the vegetable, and the difference in temperature between the batter and the oil was important, too. In other words, you had to manage the temperatures perfectly in order to make delicious, crispy tempura. And since I couldn't be bothered to do the extra work, I used mayonnaise instead of eggs to prevent the batter from ending up soggy. Mayonnaise was often used as a substitute in dishes that used eggs.

As I mixed the mayo with water, a thought came to me. I wondered if the floaty jellyfish-looking spirit could help.

As an experiment, I laid a glass bowl near it and gave it a poke. It seemed to realize it was being asked to work, and it reached for the bowl with its little appendages. I felt the air grow cold, and I laughed when I found that the water had been chilled nicely. The spirit wasn't just useful for air conditioning, but cooking, too. This creature was proving to be indispensable for the summer.

After adding flour and stirring the mixture, the tempura pan heated up and was ready to go.

It would all be about speed and timing from here. I dried off the shiso leaves and added batter on one side, then picked it up with chopsticks and tossed it into the hot pan, making it sizzle nicely. Surprised by the unfamiliar sound, Marie's long ears trembled.

"We're going to put them in the pan, starting in order from the ones that are easiest to fry and smell the least. When they float up to the surface and the bubbles turn smaller, it means they're ready to be taken out." I removed the excess oil, placed the leaf on a mesh screen, then got to work adding the rest. Temperature management was crucial, and timing was key, as well. This was a dish that could have been made in any household, but tempura was still quite difficult. At the very least, I didn't like making it.

I fried the shiso, asparagus, and shishito peppers in order, and the room was filled with a warm, gentle smell. The lighter items were fun to fry due to how quickly they cooked. As I continued the process, I sensed something below. I looked down to find a black cat roaming around my feet and meowing restlessly.

"I'm busy right now, so no snacking for you. You'll have to wait until I'm done

cooking.” Fried food wasn’t good for cats in the first place. I didn’t know if such logic applied to familiars, but as I mentioned earlier, frying food was a game of speed and timing.

But the cat cared not for such trivial things. I was taken aback when it dug its claws into my pants and climbed up my leg. Its eyes seemed to say “Give me a taste already, human,” as it moved closer with a look that told me it was already set on swiping something to eat. It was painful, but cats sure were cute. I relented and picked up a shishito pepper with my chopsticks, then moved it closer to the cat while it continued to hang off of my butt. The cat opened its mouth wide, which may or may not have been a threat to eat me whole.

The cat chomped down on the pepper, then narrowed its eyes happily. It seemed to be pleased by the satisfying texture and fragrance of the flavorful vegetable. The cat made a strange sound that was a mixture of a purr and a growl, then flashed an expression of pure bliss.

Things were quiet now that the pesky one was out of the way, so I decided to finish cooking the rest of the food.

I tossed in the vegetables one after another, placing them on the mesh as they were cooked through. The process took less time than it usually did to cook dinner, and I only needed about twenty minutes or so.

I then placed the food on plates, brought out some dipping sauce and salt, and I was all done. As Marie and the black cat stared at the steamy tempura, I placed our rice and beer on the table.

We said our usual thanks before the meal, then each picked up our chopsticks.

Marie still seemed to be cautious, and I was curious to know what she thought. She bit through the crispy tempura with a satisfying sound, and the scent and flavor of the batter filled her mouth. The asparagus tempura was nicely cooked all the way through, allowing her to chew through it with ease. After that came the vegetable’s inherent sweetness.

It was a warm, comforting taste that was only heightened when dipped in tempura sauce, and it was further enhanced when combined with rice. The elf furrowed her brows, wriggling around as she chewed.

“Mmmf...!” I was expecting to hear her feedback, but she seemed to return to her senses and reached for her chilled beer. She picked up the glass and tilted it back toward her mouth.

The synergy was exquisite. The oil and the natural sweetness of the vegetables didn’t obstruct the flavor of the beer; in fact, they perfectly complimented it as side dishes for the beverage. Considering we had both sweated a lot during the day, the carbonated beer going down her throat must have felt amazing. Wridra’s pink-nosed familiar watched the elf as she drank, and then Marie practically slammed the glass onto the table with an “Ahhh!”

“Hey, what’s the meaning of this?! You call this cooking modest? Try saying that again with a straight face. It’s so fragrant and satisfying... Ah, I get it now. It’s because of this. This is why my drive to become an Advanced Sorceress has diminished. I’m sure of it.”

“What? That can’t be. There’s no way tempura could sway your life so dramatically. More importantly, here. Try some of this eggplant. I just fried it, so I’m sure it’s good.” Marie’s expression suddenly turned to a pouty one, and she glared at the eggplant for some reason.

I could tell what she was thinking by the cautious look on her face. She was thinking, “This must be a trap. This is the representation of the vegetables I hate so much, and turning it into tempura won’t make a difference.”

But the eggplant had, in fact, transformed into a different being completely. By cooking it thoroughly and letting it soak up the oil, the eggplant’s texture had turned incredibly soft. As Marie bit into the eggplant, she was shocked by the distinctive texture of its exterior and its creamy interior.

“Oho ho ho.”

“Hm? What was that?” I couldn’t tell if she was commenting on the taste or laughing, so I had to ask. Marie swallowed her mouthful, then turned her slightly reddened face toward me.

“Okay, okay, I get it! I understand what you’re trying to do here, and I’m not upset about it at all! The eggplant gets a pass. I can understand why influential people would hoard them, and why they spread throughout Japan if they taste like this. I was wrong for hating them, okay?!” She burst out complaining, then

took another swig of her beer. Overcome with bliss, Marie let out another satisfied sigh.

“Eggplants are delicious when fried, too. You need to be careful because it absorbs the oil, but you can trap in the umami if you take it out early enough.” Though, the reason for their popularity was because they went well with any ingredient. The strange thing about this vegetable was that it became the star of the show when fried in oil.

Vegetable tempura was quite an interesting dish. All one had to do was add batter and fry it, but the texture and flavor changed dramatically. We continued enjoying our food, picking up this piece and that with our chopsticks. The shiso was nice and fragrant, and the pumpkin was sweet and warm. Then, there was the salt. Using salt instead of tempura dipping sauce changed the flavor to a more simple one, but it was still delicious.

“Mmm, delicious! I love how light the vegetable tempura are. I could eat a million of these.”

It was hard to believe she was hating on vegetables not too long ago. But it didn't feel bad to hear her say this; in fact, I wanted her to eat even more. I felt like an old lady watching a travel show and smiling as the host talked about how tasty the food was. But for tonight, I would've been a lot happier if I managed to help her overcome her dislike for vegetables.

Watching the black cat munch away at some tempura on a small plate, I slowly sipped at my drink. Of course, I wouldn't have given this kind of food to an actual cat.



The plates were soon left empty, and the elf girl's stomach was full of food.

The jellyfish-like creature floated around in the air, and a fan continued to blow a nice breeze.

I chuckled to myself at the familiar sight and began washing the dishes. I wanted to lounge around too, but it would have been more of a hassle if I left the dishes for later, and I wanted to take a bath early and prepare for bed.

As I washed the dishes one by one, I heard Marie's voice from behind me.

"The summer vegetables were so delicious. I was so happy the whole time I was eating. I could picture veggies marching around inside my head! All of the vegetables in the other world taste so awful, I never would have even thought about eating them." When I turned around, I found Marie hugging the backrest of a chair with her face still pink from the alcohol.

"That's just how it is, really. It's hard to keep food fresh over there. Even the noinoi that you hate so much taste good and don't smell too bad when they're in season. They're just hard to get while fresh for ordinary people."

Maybe selective breeding was a big part of it, too. Farmers were constantly making an effort to make their food better tasting, bigger, and easier to grow. It was just that the farmers of our world had spent many more years going through trial and error... Not only that, but the fact that there was no way to store the vegetables in the other world had to be a big reason why they tasted the way they did.

I told this to Marie, and she made a face that said "It's such a shame."

"Aww... If only I could eat vegetables from Japan in the other world, too. Though, farmland in Arilai is very limited, and it's all owned by others already."

"Yeah, there's no way we're going to conveniently find some land to cultivate..."

Something felt off. We each looked at each other, and time quietly passed by. It felt like we were forgetting something, and remembering it would solve this problem before us. Marie, the black cat, and I all stared at the ceiling in silence for a while.

“This is frustrating. It’s like I feel a sneeze coming on, but it won’t come out.”

“Yeah, it feels just like that. We won’t be able to bring seeds over to the other world, though. I can only bring food and drinks with me. But wait, you can cook pumpkin seeds and eat them, so would they count as food?”

“Meowww!” The black cat, which had been curled up on the table earlier, cried out in realization. Those eyes like pretty glass beads lit up, and the cat plopped its paws on Marie, who was sitting there blankly. It seemed to be pleading for us to notice something. Marie, who was satisfied with a stomach full of tempura, just giggled and noted how cute the cat was.

I was starting to get used to that annoyed expression on the cat’s face. After wiping down some plates, I brought some cups of tea over to the table where the others were sitting. Just then, I heard Marie let out a cheer.

“Wow, you can stand? I’ve seen a video like this on TV before.” I was surprised, too. I nearly spilled the tea all over the place. The cat was waddling around on the table.

“Huh, I didn’t know cats could stand if they tried. It’s cute how it’s curling its paws in front of its chest.” Marie laughed in agreement. Meanwhile, the cat glared at us as if scolding us to take this seriously. Maybe it wasn’t playing around, but trying to tell us something.

“Aha, that waddle is so adorable! Let’s take some pictures.”

“Looks like it’s imitating a ghost with that pose. Whoa, why are you hugging me all of a sudden?” The cat plopped its arms around my shoulder, then looked at me with glittering eyes. But what could it have been trying to tell us? The cat seemed to be reacting to what I had just said, so it must have been trying to convey a message. Marie finally caught on too and stared at the cat contemplatively.

“Is it just me, or did it just react to the word ‘ghost’?”

“Maybe it wants to see a horror movie again...? No, that’s not it. Hey, don’t scratch. That hurts,” I said to the cat.

“Speaking of ghosts, that reminds me of the second floor we spent time on in the other world. There were ghosts all over the place then. It felt more strange

than scary, though.”

“They were mostly undead with physical forms, like Living Armor and Reaper. The floor master, Shirley, might’ve been the most ghost-like out of all of them. She *was* semi-transparent and took people’s souls, after all. Whoa, why are you rubbing your head against me all of a sudden?” I was surprised when the cat suddenly purred and rubbed its head against me. Not only that, but it moved its face right up to mine.

It repeatedly slapped its paw against my shoulder, as if urging me to give my answer. It seemed I was getting very close, but I still didn’t know where this was going.

“Shirley, Shirley... Hmm, what are you trying to tell me? I get that it’s supposed to be a hint, but... Come to think of it, what were we trying to remember earlier? We were talking about vegetables, right?”

“Ahhh!!!” Marie shouted and stood straight up from her chair. The elf and black cat stared at each other, the light shining in their eyes... Sadly, I was the only one left out of the conversation.

“Huh? What? You figured it out? What was it?”

“Hee hee, then let me give a hint for the sleepy-faced little Kazuhiho. Here, we have a pumpkin seed. What’s one thing it needs to grow?” I mean, the answer was obviously farm land. I stared blankly, which felt like an appropriate reaction. Marie saw that I couldn’t answer and smiled happily.

“Do you remember seeing any suitable land in the ancient labyrinth?”

“A farm in the ancient labyrinth? Come on, this is an amazing labyrinth from ancient times we’re talking about. If there was land like that in the area, I would’ve remembered...” I trailed off.

Wait a minute, hadn’t I done something unusual there? Didn’t I have an unnatural experience that was out of place in the ancient labyrinth? The first thing that came to mind was the fact that I became friends with the floor master, Shirley. It really was hard to believe, but it was the truth, and I had spent time playing on the second floor where she lived.

As for what I did specifically, I had managed something that couldn’t normally

be done, even here in Japan. I recalled the shade of the warm tree and how the wind felt nice as it caressed my face. Insects cried out all over, and the smell of soil and grass felt nostalgic. It was as if I had arrived at a rural summer retreat.

The fishing pole in my hand swayed as I hummed and walked alongside Marie. I heard the river flowing gently as we proceeded through a footpath and declared I would catch a big one today, and then...

“Oh, the hall on the second floor! Something like a river and sun were created by Shirley’s power. Is that what you were talking about?!”

“Exactly. I’ve never seen such healthy soil in Arilai, and if we bring seeds with us, we may even be able to start a farm. I’m sure Shirley would smile and agree, too. I mean, we would be able to eat so many delicious vegetables!” Marie touched my arm and smiled besides me. Her eyes were full of curiosity, though part of her motivation was a desire for food, as she had just mentioned.

“Well?” she asked, cocking her head at me. Her large eyes seemed to say “Let’s grow crops to our hearts’ content and enjoy some delicious food.” With those eyes and that smile directed right at me, I had no choice but to surrender. I stood no chance.

“Hm, even if the farm ends up failing, we’d only feel a bit sad about it. So, we might as well try. We’ve got nothing to lose, after all.”

“Yes! I can’t wait to go to the dream world. As an elf, I’m very particular about farming. Will a skinny modern man like you be able to endure it?” She booped my nose with a finger teasingly, a cheerful smile on her face. I didn’t know why, but Marie was so beautiful at times like these.

She was giddy as she hopped on my lap, her toes waving back and forth, as if to finish me off. It would have been quite cruel if she was making me feel this way subconsciously.

“Hee hee, I can’t wait to farm. First, we’ll have to find out if we can bring seeds with us. If it works, let’s start preparing for our trip to the second floor. It should take a whole day to get to the oasis where the ancient labyrinth is, and we’d have to wait until we get orders to go there as Team Amethyst, so we’ll have to figure out a method of transportation. Well, now that we know what to do, I’ll be taking a bath. You should hurry, too. Don’t just sit there blankly, or I’ll

have to leave you behind.”

Marie hopped off of my lap, waved goodbye, and headed toward the bathroom. It was hard to believe someone so restless had lived for so many years. Considering this was all over a desire to eat good vegetables, she seemed even more human-like than me. I sank lower into my chair.

I could see the sun had set through the window, and I sat at the table alone.

It seemed the cat had been really into bathing as of late, and I could hear the faint sound of happy voices from the bathroom. As for me, I was rearranging my documents and doing work for my company.

Most people would have been scolded for bringing work back home with them, but I wanted to get home as soon as possible. As long as I finished my work as scheduled, no one had any right to complain. It was fine as long as no one found out.

I was writing with my pen when I noticed something. The ice spirit was gently floating through the air. I figured it may have disappeared if it tried to follow its master, and I decided to talk to it.

“Hey, thanks for the hard work. I’ll probably be in your care a lot this year, so thank you in advance.” The jellyfish glowed with a pale light as if to say “Leave it to me!” My room was becoming lively even without the other two present. This felt very strange to me.

Their voices became louder. It seemed they had finished bathing.

I decided to prepare some iced tea while they dried their hair. As I bundled the documents together and prepared to stand, I heard the door sliding open behind me. They got changed very quickly tonight, I thought, as I turned around...

“Hey, welcome baaack?!”

“So hoooot!” I couldn’t believe my eyes. Mariabelle had opened the door without getting dressed. I froze in place as I saw her wrapped in a bath towel, her wet hair clinging to her body. There was sweat on her pale skin, and despite

the towel covering her breasts, the sweat-soaked piece of fabric seemed to accentuate her slight protrusions.

Marie walked barefoot toward the fan, waving at her heated face with her hand.

“I’m surprised... I didn’t realize it would be so hot getting out of the bath in summer. Nn, that’s a nice breeze! I’m so glad we decided to make this.” Marie’s face expressed pure bliss as she leaned forward into the cold wind. She must have really loved it, considering she sat down in front of the fan and let out a “Waaah...” Then, the jellyfish-like spirit floated over in search of its master, and plopped onto her head.

Marie was getting more thinly dressed as we went deeper into summer. She had been exposing her shoulders more often as of late, but wearing nothing but a bath towel was a whole other story... It made her incredible attractiveness all the more apparent.

The bath towel stuck to her body made me all too aware of her slender, feminine figure. The way she sat there with her legs folded under her without covering up her slim waist, butt, sweaty thighs, and exposed shoulders was so alluring that I couldn’t help but follow her with my eyes.

...I kind of like the bath towel look.

Marie turned around, as if to ask if I’d said something, and I tried to play it cool. I wanted her to stay aloof like this, if possible. Though, that probably wasn’t a thought I should have been having. Feeling a twinge of guilt about it, I walked by Marie while trying not to look at her and decided to bring out some drinks from the fridge.

“They say that in Japan, it’s bad manners to walk around in a bath towel.”

“Ah, but it’s just you here, so it should be fine, right? It would be one thing if it was in front of others, but you’re my boyfriend. Oh, oh! Can you get me some ice cream, too? I have some vanilla ice cream in there!”

I didn’t realize she had prepared some after-bath ice cream. It seemed Marie had been learning how to enjoy her time in Japan even more than I assumed. Though, I wasn’t quite sure if having ice cream after a bath would fall under the

category of the proper way to spend one's summer. I grabbed some vanilla ice cream as requested, then poured some iced tea into a glass and brought them over to Marie.

A sweets-loving black cat came running over from the dressing room and leaped onto the chair right as I placed the dessert on the table.

"Hey, even you haven't dried off, Wridra? Do you realize how awful it would be to catch a cold in this heat?" The cat stuck its pink tongue out at me, but the nasty expression was actually quite comical, and it made me laugh.

Marie joined us late and took a seat, and their moment of bliss began. She scooped some ice cream with her silver spoon and put it in her mouth. The coldness was just right, and the rich sweetness immediately melted on her tongue, making her furrow her brows and squirm.

"Mmm, delicious! Ahh, I've finally discovered the way to enjoy bathing to the fullest..." All she was doing was having some ice cream after a bath, but she looked like she had stumbled upon an ancient secret. Or maybe her expression was more like that of a detective who had just deduced who the criminal was.

The black cat also ate the ice cream on its own glass plate. It licked away at the partially melted ice cream, joy sparkling in its eyes.

"Meowww!"

"Yes, it seems you've discovered it, too. Heaven's door, that is," Marie said knowingly. Was this what girls liked to talk about? I didn't quite get it, but I was having trouble figuring out where I was supposed to look, so I hoped Marie would change into her pajamas soon.

I wanted to at least help her dry her hair, so I picked up a bath towel and walked up to her. She was still squirming from the cold sweetness, but straightened her back as if she was giving me permission. She looked composed, like some sort of noble lady, but I was having trouble keeping my eyes off of her. Taking full advantage of my privilege as her boyfriend, I spoke to her in the most casual tone I could muster.

"The only thing is, vanilla ice cream is full of sugar, so it might make you gain weight." I was half-joking, but Marie reacted as if she had been hit with a fist.

Sweat rolled down her face, but she remained motionless for some time. The cat and I looked at each other and tilted our heads. We waited for some time, and eventually Marie spoke with a shaky voice.

“Have you ever heard the saying... that elves don’t get fat?”

The cat meowed as if to say, “What kind of saying is that?!” But wait... judging by the way she still didn’t meet my eyes, and the look on her face that told me that was what she *wanted* to believe...

“Did you... gain weight?”

“...”

Marie continued to sweat profusely, despite cooling off from the fan and the ice spirit on her head. Her reaction told me she already knew it was true before I’d asked. But come to think of it, she did seem to be a bit rounder around the edges. Though, perhaps I shouldn’t have made such observations. Mariabelle’s shoulders trembled as she opened her mouth to speak.

“...did... weight...”

“Hm? What was that?”

“I-I did gain a bit of weight lately! I can pinch the meat on my arms now!” She was half-crying and red-faced as she turned to face me, and she repeatedly squished the meat on her upper arms. To be honest, I thought it was absolutely adorable.

“Nooo! Don’t smirk at me with that sleepy-looking face! I can’t do it! It’s all over! I’ve never heard of an elf that got fat because they couldn’t resist the urge to eat sweets!” With that, she covered her face with both hands.

But why had she gained weight in the first place? It wasn’t as if she was snacking every day, and I did put effort into managing nutritious meals. With that in mind, I considered the possibility that it had to do with the change in environment.

“Oh, I get it. It must be because we haven’t been exercising in the dream world,” I commented, and Marie turned to me, on the verge of tears. She blinked her pretty eyes, then thought about it for a moment.

“Now that you mention it, we’ve been on a long break over there, so we haven’t done anything.”

“Yeah, because we finished conquering up to the second floor. There hasn’t been any work for us to do while they check through the piles of treasure, but maybe you didn’t gain weight until now because we were active before that.”

Arilai, where we worked, allowed adventurers into ancient labyrinths for the benefit of the country. The treasure, knowledge, artifacts, and Magic Stones found there would directly contribute to the country’s power, and we had obtained mountains of spoils when we cleared the second floor.

I presumed Arilai had been steadily gaining an advantage compared to its neighboring countries. Though the royal family was certainly happy about it, it took time to appraise all of the loot, so all activity in the labyrinth was on hold for now. This led to a decrease in physical exertion... In other words, it was simply a lack of exercise.

“How terrible... I’ve been getting fatter because of Arilai.”

“Ah, well, you gained weight because you kept eating, not because of...” I swallowed my words before finishing my sentence. Marie moved her face right up to mine, wordlessly insisting she was right, and all I could do was nod in agreement.

“Then, maybe we should get some exercise outside of the labyrinth, too. The farming we were talking about earlier would be a good option, and going to a pool or the sea is a staple of summer exercise—”

Marie, the cat, and I came to a realization at once.

Trayn, the Journey’s Guide, was a long-distance travel skill that allowed me to move between one shrine of the travel god to another once a day. I loved traveling so much that I often made cross-continent trips, so naturally, I had a tropical paradise registered with my skill, where I could take the girls with me.

“Yes, yes, let’s go to the sea! Oh my goodness, that’s amazing! Who knew your skill had uses like this?”

“Well, I’m glad I learned it. Let’s get ready to go as soon as we get back to the dream world. Team Amethyst would be unavailable for a bit, but I’m sure we

could get away with being gone for a day or two.”

“Yaaaaaay!” Marie could hardly contain her excitement, and she embraced me right after raising her hands in celebration. Her body was warm from being fresh out of the bath, and her soft, feminine skin against mine made me freeze in place. I had practically turned into a statue. But Marie didn’t even seem to notice, and smiled brilliantly with her face right next to mine. How inadvertently cruel she was.

“Hee hee, I can’t wait to go to the sea. And knowing you, I’m sure you know about some beautiful beach to show me. Say, what should we bring? We’ll have to make sure we don’t forget anything so we don’t have any regrets.”

“Y-Yeah...” I replied awkwardly. She smelled like soap, and her cute face was far too close. Not to mention, the fact that she was wearing nothing but a bath towel was too much for me.

I couldn’t tell if I was lucky or not. She bounced with so much excitement in her pale purple eyes, and my gaze fell to the loosening knot on her bath towel. She didn’t notice that her towel had fallen right away. I was sweating profusely the entire time Marie went on about taking a stroll while enjoying the view of the sea. She clapped her hands together and said “Doesn’t that sound like fun?” when she finally noticed I was deliberately looking away from her.

Marie went quiet, and then her gaze lowered to her own body.

“Nnyaaaaaaaaa!” It was the expected reaction. Marie screamed, her face completely red.

Later that day, there was a notice put up in the corner of the room that read “No walking around in nothing but a bath towel.” I admired how good Marie’s handwriting was as I stared at it.

Now, it was just about bedtime.

I laid there in my room, dim with only indirect lighting.

Marie rested her head on my chest like a cat that liked to nestle into tight spaces. Her hair was disheveled, and she was breathing rhythmically in her sleep. Although it was a rather comforting rhythm, I was having a hard time

sleeping at the end of the restless day.

Marie turned over in her sleep, turning her cute face toward me. Her skin felt smooth against mine, and the stifling air of the previous night was completely gone. She had made the stuffy room comfortable in a single day, which I still found surprising each and every day since.

Looking up, I saw a small bag on a shelf next to my pillow. Inside of it were some pumpkin seeds for our experiment to see if they could be brought into my dreams. If we succeeded in carrying them with us, we just may have been able to start a vegetable farm.

“We have our trip to the sea, too. This summer definitely feels different from the rest.” I chuckled to myself, and the long ear in front of me twitched. I wondered if she heard my voice, or the sound of wind chimes in the distance.

I thought that it might be fun if I took her to the Wind Chime Festival. I could just picture her with her mouth agape at the sight of mountains of wind chimes before her. I had a feeling she would try her best to find the cutest one. In my mind, I could see her gesturing to them and saying how pretty they were. Even though I had never been to the festival myself.

Such thoughts always occupied my mind as of late. As I imagined all the ways I could make her happy, I began to doze off. The days we had spent together were simple, but I found joy just imagining such sights.

The warmth of her body, the quietly spinning fan, and the purr of a cat from under the blanket... Our room in the summer was full of comforts that were unbecoming of the season.

Good night... I uttered in my mind, and before I knew it, I was fast asleep. In my dream, I would catch up to the other girls.

Chapter of Midsummer, Episode 3: A Sudden S-Rank Mission

Clicking sounds could be heard in regular intervals in the dimly lit room. The sound came from the spoils from the ancient labyrinth placed on the wall of the room.

The ornament with artistic details displayed the passage in intervals of time seconds, minutes, hours, days, and years. It was highly advanced, and despite the best efforts of the country's engineers, they failed to replicate its power supply. Anyone could see that this was a product of the most advanced technology there was. But sadly, now that it was placed in the hall of the royal family, it only served as a symbol of authority to be flaunted to guests.

Two men stood in that hall. Hakam, who was tasked with managing the raid of the ancient labyrinth, and Aja, the aged wizard. They had experienced countless battlefields and possessed the wisdom necessary to command hundreds of men at once. And these two men had been assigned new missions by the royal family. Just like the clock that was resting on the wall. Hakam finally broke the silence.

"Did you see? Zarish's arm bone was exposed."

"Yes, it seems he's going through quite the treatment. I heard he spilled the truth as soon as he arrived here. So why did he do such a pitiful thing?" The old man rubbed his beard as he pondered out loud, though it wasn't as if he was worried about Zarish's well-being.

"He was like a different person. Before, he would have tried to lie his way out of trouble," Hakam, the commander, agreed.

"Are there more rings that can control others?"

"You could even classify it as a relic. Its ability to control others and even drain their levels is far too powerful. It's not something that someone should be allowed to wield. You want to know if there are others? I didn't even realize

Team Diamond had them in the first place. What makes you think I would know?"

The item couldn't even be detected by a Wizard. This went to show just how rare skills in the form of rings were, and due to its unique nature, it was extremely hard to notice.

"You think the royal family will make a move on Eve out of greed?"

"If Zarish dies, yes. The fact that he's not putting up any resistance tells me he's still under her influence. They certainly don't have the guts to relinquish that control and set the beast free. Especially considering they can't even kill him due to his guardian power being too powerful. I suspect his arm has its bone bare because he was forcefully holding back his power." He had seen the torture room earlier, and Zarish was like a growling beast within the darkness.

Zarish would answer when questioned, but figuring out whether his words were true was part of the torturer's job. Armed with special tools, the torturers were pale-faced as they tried to carry out their jobs, but they were up against someone too powerful. When the torturers tried using Eve's name to threaten him, the young man's expression turned cold, and they were stricken with fear as invisible blades carved chunks out of the walls around them.

Zarish had already told the truth, but the royal family didn't believe him. No, they chose not to. They thought they had stumbled upon a treasure trove, but it was just bait. Zarish had revealed the truth that not only Arilai, but the entire continent was under the threat of being destroyed. Hakam and Aja could see that the persistent torture stemmed from denial of the terrible truth lurking beneath the surface. It was their way of throwing a tantrum, hoping that Zarish would tell them it was all a lie.

"And so, we were tasked with our mission." They sighed heavily.

It was clear by the expressions on their faces that they also understood the sad reality of things. The truth that Zarish had revealed was so devastating that anyone would want to escape from reality.

The reason the ancient labyrinths had been reopened...

The reason the oasis, the excavation site for Magic Stones, had been

abandoned...

And the reason the neighboring country of Gedovar had interfered with the raid in the labyrinth.

The pieces had come together tonight... in the worst way possible. And now, the two had been entrusted with a request. They had been given the impossible task of drawing out even more information from the traitor Zarish and dealing with the ancient catastrophe to come. But there was no escaping their duty. Even if they were headed to ruin, they had already lost too many men to count. When they thought about their comrades that had fallen before they could accomplish their goal, giving up was not an option.

“The royal family is as awful as always. They’ve been benefitting from the labyrinth all this time, then give up at the first sign of trouble.”

“No matter how delicious a meal is, you have no choice but to discard it if it’s poisoned. Prepare yourself. We’re on the verge of losing an entire country. It’s your job to press on despite everything,” Hakam lifted his head and shot Aja a look that said, “That’s your job, too.”

“What can an old man like me do?” Aja responded.

They were joking around as usual in an attempt to regain a bit of composure, no matter how small. But judging by the looks on their faces, it wasn’t working.

“But why? It shouldn’t awaken in this world, according to the legends.”

“And yet, it will try. I doubt it will truly awaken, but some sort of external factor may be at play here. Or perhaps a demon’s...”

Bzz, bzzz, zzz!

White noise sounded from the Magic Tool, cutting off their conversation. The contents of the report mixed with screams from the special unit sent by the royal family was just as they had imagined.

“We can’t seal it! I repeat, we cannot reseal the underground labyrinth!” They could hardly even offer words of appreciation for the men that had given up their lives for their mission. That was just how badly these two—no, the entire country of Arilai were being cornered.

It was impossible to close the labyrinth. Arilai could either swallow the entire ancient labyrinth and end the raid, or be left with no choice but to walk the path to ruin. The commander understood this and stared at the expressionless old man.

“Aja, we will first stamp out anyone standing in our path. This is the whole reason we’ve been granted the authority to do anything, other than threatening the royal family.”

“Hm. Then we can accomplish that with a single move. Those who side with the neighboring countries as Zarish did, and the hooligans hanging around on the third floor... We can ruin their day in one fell swoop. And one more thing... Considering the massive scope of this mission, they may not like it, but we should make use of the king’s power, as well. Though, half of my motivation for doing so is just to annoy them.”

The two finally broke out in muffled laughter. Despite the precarious position they were in, their years of experience allowed them to laugh it off as they considered the best possible move to take.

“Let’s begin, then. Oh, and whatever you do, don’t let them catch on to what we’re doing,” Hakam said.

“Yes, I’ll talk to the raid team myself. I know what is at stake, but I have no intention of using the team as a sacrifice. I want you to swear you’ll bring your men back alive, too.”

It wasn’t something that could have been easily accomplished, but Hakam replied that he would without hesitation.

There was no time. There weren’t many people to allocate to the mission. They needed to take their time in selecting the personnel, but being in the cornered state they were, the two ran with their animalistic instincts. Aja grinned, having decided who could bring a glint of hope to this desperate battle.

“But to think, we’ve been granted the authority to do anything other than threatening the royal family. Ha ha ha, they must have been quite desperate to approve that. I wish I could’ve seen their faces!”

“I couldn’t have you with me, because you would’ve burst out laughing.

Enough of this. Let's begin," Hakam said, but there was a smile on his own face, as well. However, the smile wasn't as cheerful as their conversation would have suggested, but was instead that of a beast gleaming in the dark room.

§

I had the ability to travel into my dream world just by going to sleep.

And by sleeping or dying on the other side, I could return back to Japan, in my own world. That was why I could lay a blanket down anywhere and fall asleep, and I wasn't fazed by waking up in an unfamiliar place. Whether it be on a mountain, or in a river... Well, actually, I would probably have panicked if I woke up underwater.

Anyway, I had to award a gold star for how good I felt waking up this morning. My blanket was cozy, and the morning sun shone in between the curtains. A single flower sat by the window, and there was even a cushion under my head. And to top it all off, I was on a luxury bed that was likely made by an expert craftsman. I had a reputation for giving high ratings to bedding in general, but this one was fantastic without a doubt.

"Hmm, so this is the Manor of Black Roses. It's hard to believe this is just a guest room, with this level of comfort. It might be even better than luxury beds in Japan." I stretched out my arms, then let out a long yawn.

One may have wondered why a commoner like me was living like this. It was because we had been given permission to stay here by the top team of Arilai, Team Diamond. Ever since we had defeated the hero candidate, Zarish, and dispelled the control he had over the women in Team Diamond, Puseri had allowed us to stay at the manor for as long as we wanted. We were incredibly grateful for this, considering we had no place to stay.

As I sat there appreciating our lodging situation, my companion seemed to have finally awoken and stirred next to me under the blanket. Her characteristic long elven ears twitched, and she let out a big yawn. Her long, white eyelashes quivered, eventually revealing her pale purple eyes. Those fantastical and beautifully colored eyes I loved so much slowly focused onto me.

"Hey, there. Good morning, Marie," I said, but she simply stared back sleepily without uttering a word. I wondered if she was still half-asleep. Then, she began

crawling up my body. She reached out, and her hand moved past me and toward my pillow.

“Pumpkin... seeds...”

It seemed there was something occupying her mind more than the usual morning greeting. She was talking about the pumpkin seeds we had prepared the previous night to see if we could bring them over to this world. Although we had the ability to import food and drinks, I had no idea whether seeds counted, as well.

But there was one problem. Marie’s lumps were closing in right in front of my nose, and they threatened to touch my face, despite my efforts to lean back out of the way. Just as I grew increasingly flustered by her faintly sweet and feminine scent, Marie exclaimed with a cheerful voice.

“Oh, oh, they’re here! There’s something in the bag! I think it’s the seeds!”

“What? Really? I’m glad we were able to bring them over.”

Marie shook the paper bag, and it was clear from the sound that there was something inside. Maybe it was because they could be roasted and eaten, but luckily, they seemed to pass the restrictions.

I considered how unpredictable the world could be sometimes, when another unexpected thing happened. Marie sat... on my stomach, with her legs on either side of me.

“Yes, there are so many seeds in here! Look, look, we brought over so many!” Marie giggled and showed me the seeds in her hand. She seemed completely oblivious to my distress from feeling the fresh-out-of-bed warmth of her butt on my stomach. This was bad. I had to distract myself from focusing on that sensation.

“Y-Yeah, looks like it worked. Then let’s try bringing them over to Shirley later.”

“Let’s do that. I feel like she wouldn’t mind us starting a farm if it’s small.” Marie now seemed completely awake from the excitement, and a happy smile spread across her face.

There was something peaceful about the sight of her poking at the pumpkin seeds with the sunlight peering in from the curtains. It seemed Marie was excited about farming, especially considering her elven background. Of course, I was interested in farming too, even though I was what one might call a modern man. Land where one could partake in gardening was quite rare in the city.

Knock, knock

We turned toward the knock at the door.

The room was quite big for a guest room, which made the door seem all the more distant. The bed with a canopy, the serene furniture, and sunlight coming in from the embroidered curtains felt a bit above my means. There was something very courteous about the way the owner of the manor was treating us.

“Heeey, Kazu, you awake?”

“Yeah, I’m awake,” I answered. The doorknob turned with a click, and the door was pushed open. The face that peeked in, of course, belonged to Evelyn the dark elf. Her blonde hair was tied back, and she wore a headband like that of a servant working in the manor. Her shoulders were exposed in her maid’s outfit, which seemed to be a modification tailored to her tastes.

But her face turned pink as soon as she saw me, and she hid back behind the door. She then peeked back in from the door’s opening.

“Oh, sorry to interrupt. I didn’t think you two would be doing that so early in the morning... but it’s understandable, considering you’re both young. I forgot you weren’t as innocent as you look, Kazu. Guess I’ll have to be careful, too...”

Marie and I stared at each other for several seconds, completely confused. Then, it hit me. She saw Marie mounted on top of me and misunderstood the situation. Marie’s entire face turned red at once.

“N-No! We didn’t... Eve, don’t tease us! It’s not like that, so come back in here, please!”

“Sorry, I don’t think I can enter your love nest. You were saying something about seed? Sounds kinda like some grown-up talk. So, when are you planting it?”

Welp, I hadn't seen that coming. Marie didn't even know how to react to the dirty jokes being directed at us. She stammered, at a loss for words, and looked at me for assistance. Unfortunately, I didn't have the guts to explain away what had just happened.

"I feel like she was mocking me, for some reason. I'm going to teach Eve a lesson, so you stay here." With that, Marie climbed out of bed. She then turned to me as if she just remembered something and whispered "I forgot to say good morning," and ran out the door. Soon after, I heard a voice shouting "Get back here!" and Eve's bubbly laughter. I noted how energetic they were so early in the morning.

Left alone, I had no choice but to get up, as well. I let out a big yawn and stretched. It was my routine gesture I went through upon waking, and another adventure in the dream world had begun. The raid on the ancient labyrinth hadn't been resumed yet, and I was enjoying the peaceful, leisurely days in the meantime.

I tidied up and left the room into a spacious corridor of a noble's manor. There were windows lining the corridor to let in some natural light from outside.

"Just so you know, Kazu, no one got near you two while you were sleeping."

I nearly jumped in the air. I didn't sense anyone approaching, but the voice had spoken from right next to me. I whirled around to find a familiar woman standing there with her back against the wall, smiling with amusement.

"I thought you were being chased around by Marie?"

"Well, I'm one of these, after all." With that, Eve put her hands together to gesture as a ninja would. She stuck her tongue out playfully, seeming to enjoy the fact that her trick had worked. Marie was probably walking around somewhere in the manor right now, looking lost.

Eve moved away from the wall and started walking beside me. I was much younger in this world, so I had to look up to meet her eyes.

"Thanks for looking out for us. I didn't want people finding out that we can travel to and from Japan."

“Ah, it’s nothing. Don’t even sweat it. When you’re as skilled as I am, you can react to someone approaching even while asleep. But you know, there’s something endearing about boys who keep secrets.”

Girls these days sure did say odd things. Though, I hadn’t ever asked her about her age, so I could have been younger than her. In any case, our friend protecting our secret, Evelyn—also known as Eve—had been keeping watch for us even as we slept to make sure our secret didn’t get revealed. She was quite the incredible dark elf ninja. It was thanks to her support that we were able to safely and comfortably enjoy our time in the dream world.

“This might be rude of me to ask, but how old are you, Eve?”

“How old do you think? I’ll tell you if you guess it right. You have until we find Marie.”

Maybe it was because of the height difference, but she said it with the tone of an older sister. I decided to play her guessing game while we looked for the missing Marie. And so, we started walking under the sunlight.

Team Diamond’s home base, which was known as the Manor of Black Roses, was massive compared to the homes of other aristocrats, and had an incredibly deep history. The black roses in the garden, which were the namesake of the manor, had bloomed beautifully now that the rainy season had passed.

Some time later, we were guided to the best seats for sitting in the sun filtering through foliage. Marie, the black cat, and I sat down, and we were thrilled when tea and snacks were immediately brought out for us.

“I feel a bit bad about having everything taken care of for us,” I said.

“Don’t even worry about it. You know what? You should just join us as members at this point.” Eve, who was still in her bare-shouldered maid outfit, rested her chin in her hands.

I was fortunate enough to become close friends with her ever since the incident from the other day. This was my first time having a dark elf friend, and not only did I feel comfortable interacting with her in a casual tone, but she was surprisingly very kind. Honestly, I thought she was wonderful enough to cancel out the bad reputation of her whole race.

That aside, my eyes went wide at the sudden invitation to join her as a team member.

“What? But Team Diamond has like ten members already. You have room for more?” I asked, and the woman in a dress sitting across from us looked up as she poured some tea. The woman with twilight eyes and hair, that hair wavy like rose vines, was named Puseri, the new master of Team Diamond as of a few days ago.

“As a matter of fact, there are plenty of teams that would love to recruit you into their ranks. As the ones responsible for defeating the floor master of the first and second floors, many would spare no expense to have you on board.”

“We’re actually here because we want to avoid that very thing.”

The look in Puseri’s eyes told me she expected as much. I figured the other teams would give up on trying to recruit us if we got familiar with Team Diamond, which had a reputation for being the most capable team there was. Marie, who was listening to the conversation, took a sip of tea and opened her mouth to speak.

“I’m sorry for staying at your home like it’s a hideout. It’s so comfortable and lovely here.”

“Thank you. Though, we’ve been benefiting from your stay, as well. We don’t want you to join another team and threaten our position at the top, after all.” I was surprised by how much credit she was giving us, but knowing both sides were mutually satisfied put my mind at ease. Although, there was also the fact that we were a bit concerned about the ladies after they had reformed their team.

Something crossed my memory just then, and I looked at Eve.

“Zarish hasn’t returned from the castle yet? How many days has it been?”

“Five, I think... I think it’ll take a while longer, but he’s tough. I know he’ll be fine,” Eve replied with a hint of sadness in her eyes and nodded. Zarish certainly was a cruel man, but thanks to the fact that he had been under the control of these women, he was currently under questioning regarding the neighboring country of Gedovar.

“I think it’s important for him to pay for his crimes. Zarie is remorseful for those crimes, but he needs to show it to the others around him.” There was pain in Eve’s expression, but it was because she loved him that she wanted him to be properly punished for what he had done. Puseri gently touched Eve’s shoulder.

The crimes Zarish had admitted to must have been grave. But it seemed these women chose not to flee so they could continue living with each other here. Seeing Puseri’s compassion, it seemed to me that she was heading in the right direction as the master of the team. In any case, it was thankful that they were moving things along properly. We were only visitors in this country, so we wanted to avoid making any moves that would make us stand out. Nothing good came from standing out, after all.

Eve took another slow sip of her tea and looked up at the blue sky. She must have been hoping for a day when her life would go back to the way it had been.

Marie was getting fidgety after our light meal, and I suspected her mind was set on our trip to the sea and the farming that we had planned out. She was so excited about them that she was having trouble sleeping back in Japan. I took a map out of my bag and laid it out on the table for her. If we were going to enjoy our trip, it was better for us to understand the location and distance.

“Hey, hey, where is that sea you mentioned?”

“Let’s see... It’s around the middle point between Eske and Bisse, around the spot facing the Ord Sea.” My finger glided across the crude map. Our midsummer paradise was far to the east from here, and it would likely take several months to get there on foot. It would have been more realistic to get there via sea than land, but renting a ship would have cost a ridiculous amount of money.”

Eve listened to our conversation blankly, then looked at me with her blue eyes.

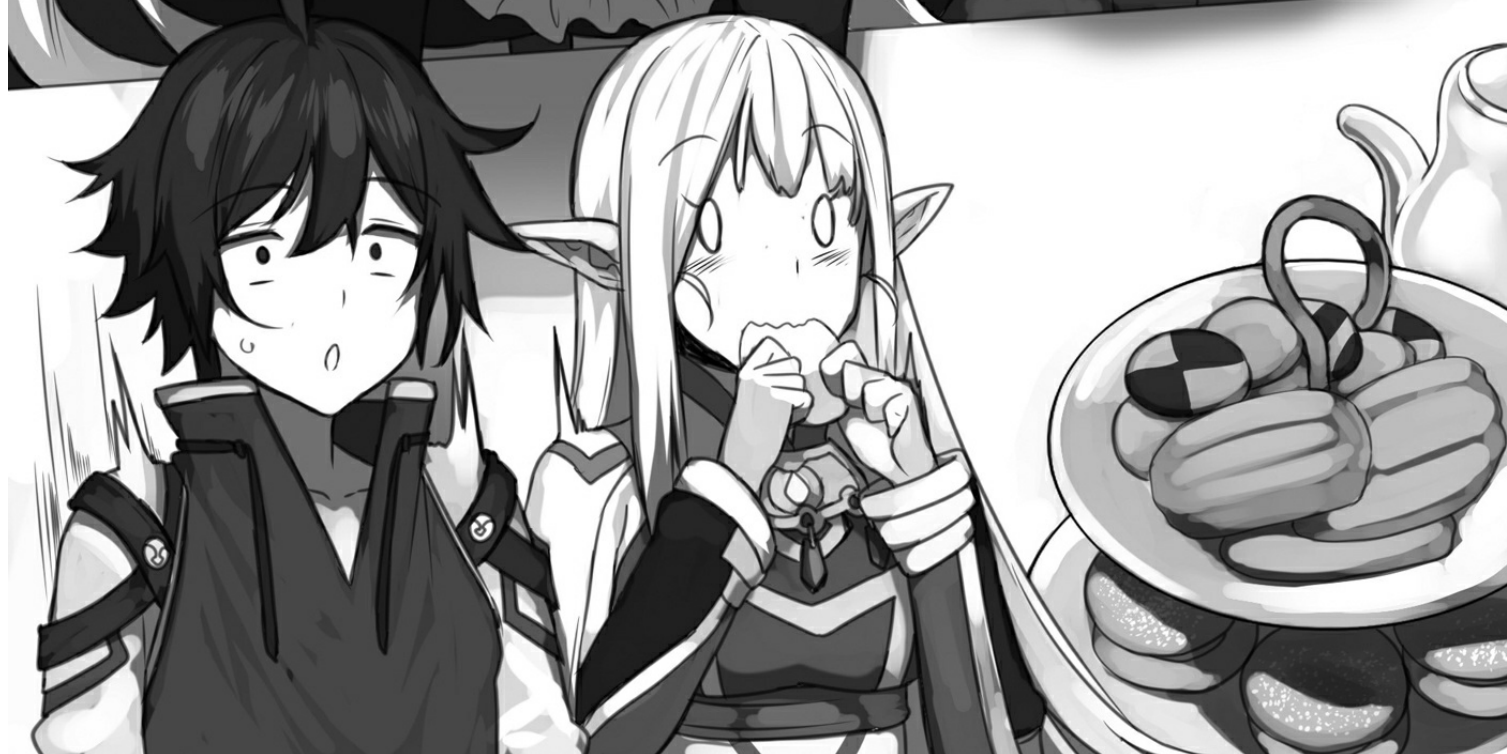
“Are you guys seriously about to leave to go that far?”

“Yes, why?” The elf girl was already daydreaming of a tropical world, and she seemed completely unconcerned by Eve’s comment. Eve blinked.

“Don’t tell me you can actually go there?”

“Yeah, we can. Movement skills are my specialty, remember?”

“No! Way! I wanna go, I wanna go, too! Take me with you!” Eve slammed the table as she stood up, her face moving right up to mine. I couldn’t help but flinch back as she came closer and closer.



Wait, hadn't she been worried about Zarish? It almost seemed like she'd already forgotten about it, but come to think of it, Eve was born by the sea. Maybe the sea held a special place in her heart. Even so, I shook my head.

"Um... I'm sorry. But we can't. My skill has a strict weight restriction."

"But I'm not fat! I'm average! See, look at my stomach!" With that, Eve pulled up the top of her maid outfit to reveal the curves of her hips and toned abs. Of course, all I could do was spit out my tea in response. Then, Puseri slapped Eve on the head, as if to reprimand her.

"Cease that this instant! You must not act so indecently in front of a gentleman!"

"Uu... I'm not fat..." Eve sobbed, though it was probably because the trip to the sea was getting out of reach and the perceived accusation of being overweight, rather than because she got slapped upside the head.

"Um... Eve, you're not fat. And it's more of a shortcoming with my skill than anything else. It's use is actually supposed to be limited to one adult, so it will only work with me and Marie."

"Hm, right... Then how can I go with you guys?"

We all let out an "Oof" at once. I was surprised by her persistence, despite having explained the situation thoroughly. She was definitely a type of person I hadn't met before.

Puseri then had a dubious expression on her face. She had known Eve for a long time and knew her personality, which was all the more reason why a question had crossed her mind.

"Eve, why are you behaving so spoiled? Kazuhiho is still young. You are being unreasonable."

"What? I mean, Kazu is so calm, mature, and dependable."

I paused.

"Huh?!" Marie and I said at once, and even the black cat, which was scratching its own head at the time, looked over with furrowed brows, as if to say the same thing. It was hard to believe a cat could make such a face, really.

It felt a bit uncomfortable having Puseri's gaze fixed upon me so intently. In this dream world, I looked to be only about fifteen years old. Plus, my face had looked naturally sleepy since birth, and my hair and eye colors were plain black... Wait, those parts were the same as before.

I smiled loosely, and Puseri cocked her head several centimeters. As for Eve, she grabbed hold of my shoulders from behind and nudged me repeatedly, saying, "Come on, come on!" adding to my discomfort. Also, I mentally wished she would stop pushing against me with her breasts.

Puseri pressed her eyebrows with her fingers and let out a heavy sigh.

"Eve, I feel as if I understand you even less now."

"Hey, that's kinda mean, don't you think?!" Eve and I reacted with shock at the same time.

But the real shock was soon to come. Not for us, but from the elf girl sitting near us and giving us a judging look.

"Whaaat?! What do you mean?!" The loud voice sent the birds resting at a nearby tree scattering into the sky.

I was surprised myself. It wasn't like the proper and polite Marie to shout so loudly, and her shoulders were trembling in rage. Meanwhile, Puseri continued her explanation apologetically.

"Last night, the king gave an official order restricting cross-border travel. Crossing the borders is strictly prohibited, no matter what one's position may be. Asking for aid from the god of travel, who cannot be restricted by anyone, is against the law, as well. I can only say that the timing is very unfortunate."

"But... we aren't from Arilai. Making us stay here for their own selfish reasons is tyranny!" Marie pressed on, but Puseri didn't know the details of why the order had been given, and so she couldn't provide an adequate explanation.

Just what was going on?

To be honest, I didn't know the details of Zarish's confession, myself. All I knew about him was his connection with a neighboring country, and that he had been interfering with the raid on the underground labyrinth. I also

understood he was trying to gain power, but I didn't know anything about the neighboring country of Gedovar's intentions. Maybe it was all related to this measure that was just taken.

Any country could freely issue a cross-border travel restriction. This was a powerful order that prevented me from using long-distance travel skills or crossing the border in secret. However, it came with significant risk, and it caused a heavy strain on the flow of distribution. The country of Arilai wasn't blessed with bountiful land, so they obviously relied heavily upon imported goods. This meant that a prolonged travel restriction could lead to their ruin, due to having insufficient food. As such, the situation was quite grave.

I was curious as to why this was happening, but I was more concerned about Marie and Wridra, who had been looking forward to their trip to the sea. But I didn't understand why Eve looked so disappointed, too. I did firmly tell her she couldn't go not too long ago...

Anyway, soon after that, a black carriage approached the manor. It parked near the premises, and someone familiar stepped out of the vehicle. The white-haired old man with deep wrinkles was Great Aja the wizard, who was a key figure in the raid on the labyrinth.

I couldn't help but wonder why he would visit here, and why he looked somewhat pale. I looked over to Marie, who was sitting next to me, and she had the same look of confusion on her face.

The old man looked around slowly, and then a smile spread across his face.

"I see you are having quite the elegant morning. As one might expect from the Manor of Black Roses."

"I am honored by your kind words. The roses have finally bloomed this year, so we all decided to come out and enjoy them. Would you perhaps like to take some home to use for flower arrangements?" Puseri asked as the master of the manor as she walked closer to the old man. She performed a graceful bow befitting of a noblewoman, then led the visitor to an empty seat.

Maybe she meant to invite him in the first place. I couldn't help but think so, seeing the complete lack of surprise in her expression. But as Aja gazed at the group gathered there, he made a curious expression upon seeing Mariabelle's

face.

“Hm? What is it? Your pretty face looks rather displeased today.”

Marie was blatantly frowning, still seemingly upset about her trip being put on hold. Eve had the same expression of discontent right next to her, and Aja blinked blankly.

“Ha ha ha, I see. Your fun vacation was interrupted by the travel restriction. I’m sorry about that.”

“This is no laughing matter. Not being able to go to the sea is one thing, but I can’t believe we can’t leave the country. We’re being prevented from returning to our own country.” The old man sat next to Marie and patted her shoulder as he told her he was sorry. He had an apologetic look on his face, as if he was watching his granddaughter have a tantrum, and he took a snack from the table. Then, he raised his white eyebrows, as though he had just noticed something.

“Hm, I suppose I will tell everyone here. This travel restriction is to wipe out the traitors who had been assisting Zarish in one swoop. Of course, the members of Team Diamond did nothing wrong. We already know that you were under the influence of his control. This was a decision by the king to prevent those traitors from fleeing the country, and I suspect it will all pass soon. But there is one more problem.”

“Another problem? What is it?” Marie asked as she looked at him in confusion.

“The rebels who are hiding within the labyrinth. According to the surveillance team, they’ve been making moves to smuggle out Magic Stones, and this restriction is meant to put a stop to their activities, as well.” We all looked at each other. This meant we could probably have gone on our trip if we captured those rebels, but it wasn’t as if we wanted to go out of our way to do that either.

“Oh, then let’s go capture them, Kazu!”

But it seemed that wasn’t the case for Eve. She touched my shoulders in an overly friendly manner as she made the suggestion, and her eyes were lit up

with excitement at the thought of going to the sea, but it wasn't as if we were about to go capture some beetles in the forest or something. This was a bit too heavy of a task just to go play at the sea. That was my honest opinion, but I decided to ask Aja anyway.

“Well, when is the raid on the labyrinths planned to reopen? They're still sealed off, as far as I'm aware.”

“It will still be sealed for some time. We will need to restructure the raid team first. A large-scale formation like before won't be possible, and we can't just request help from adventurers this time around.” Our eyes widened in surprise, and the old man looked around at each of us before continuing. It seemed this was where the main topic would begin.

The ancient labyrinth was currently closed off. We had heard this was because it would take some time to appraise the treasure found there, but when I brought this up, Aja shook his head.

“If that was the case, it would be just the management of the treasury that would be the issue. No, the real problem is the difficulty level of the third floor where the rebels are hiding.” According to him, the investigation on the next floor was ongoing, even now. However, the third floor was so difficult that the issue couldn't have been resolved by just throwing a large number of soldiers at it. Not to mention, they had to deal with the rebels themselves hiding within that floor.

“If you ask me, there were far too many casualties on the second floor. We ended up in a strange situation where the main forces were wiped out, and your team cleared the floor.”

“Do you mean that even if we increase the number of soldiers, it would only end up slowing down their overall mobility?” Mariabelle asked after listening to the old man with great interest. It felt as if she had been changing little by little lately. She had started to show an interest in group battles, the placement of soldiers, and overall strategy like what was being discussed now. It seemed like she had grown after we had launched a joint operation with another team. The old man seemed satisfied by her comment, and he smiled fondly, as if he was talking to a capable student.

“Indeed. The labyrinth is big, and it’s impossible to control every part of it completely. Our casualties will only continue to increase if we try fighting the infinitely spawning monsters. We must avoid losing any more lives at all costs.”

“So the methods used on the first floor aren’t going to work anymore...” Marie noted, and the old man wordlessly asked what we should do under these circumstances. I was curious about the answer, but I decided to think of something else while Mariabelle groaned and deliberated the question. What I had to know was, why was it so important to go through all that and continue the raid?

If it was impossible to get through with the country’s military forces, then the obvious move would have been to hire some other organizations like adventurers, as mentioned before. As long as they put in the time, they could have received payment in exchange for treasure, and all those who gathered would have provided the additional benefit of improving the economy. But for some reason, Aja didn’t want to do this. This meant that he either didn’t want to share the treasure with the adventurers, or he didn’t want to invest the time that would be required.

Another thing that caught my attention was the way he had said that we couldn’t afford to have any more casualties. Up until now, they had been sending in their forces without concern for casualties. Did that mean they wanted to preserve the forces they had left? There could have been other reasons, but it was difficult to speculate at this point.

Now, I decided to look at this from another angle. The one thing that differentiated the ancient labyrinth from any other labyrinth was the massive increase in difficulty. The treasure that could be obtained there was also far more valuable, especially Magic Stones, which I hadn’t seen anywhere else. Yes, the Magic Stones. This made me question what they even were in the first place.

But my train of thought ended here. Mariabelle had raised her hand as if she was in class, seemingly having reached her conclusion.

“Is there a need for a small team of elite soldiers? It seems to me that unlike the kind of deployment that would be needed in a war, we would require a

more powerful, concentrated force in the ancient labyrinths.” The old man gave a satisfied nod, then looked around at those sitting around the table.

“Exactly. That’s why I came here, to assign a special mission to you elites.” He produced some sort of card from his chest pocket, then placed it in front of Puseri and me. It was my first time seeing the object, which shined as if it was made of plastic. Puseri gasped.

“Could this be... an S-rank mission?! Unbelievable... it even has the king’s name written on it. That means this must be a direct order from His Majesty himself.” We were all surprised by her statement.

On the front of the card was a picture of a pair of scales, and the text indicated the god of arbitration. This meant the contract was absolute, and breaking it would have inflicted a punishment that was appropriate to the gravity of the contract. In other words, the king of Arilai himself was personally taking on the risk for this agreement.

“The objective is to clear the third floor. If you can wipe out all of the rebels there, you will be granted additional rewards. Not only will you be able to travel freely afterward, but you will be granted a more luxurious vacation than you had planned.”

I thought he was joking at first, but it seemed Aja was serious. He went on to explain that they would provide all the backup, intel, and food provisions required, and we finally understood. This was the highest difficulty mission we had faced yet.

Aja told us that he wanted us to consider it, then left the manor.

We went outside and slowly walked along the pavement.

We were told we could use the horse-drawn carriage there, but we politely declined. It wasn’t that we wanted to go somewhere specifically. We just wanted to take a walk to sort out our thoughts.

“An S-rank mission... who would have thought?” I mused.

“And to think, it was from Aja the Great himself... I was so surprised,” Marie agreed as she walked alongside me. She held the cat in her arms as we stared at the card curiously. The card emitted a pale light under the blue sky, making it

obvious that it wasn't just made of plain paper. I flipped it over to find the signature section was blank, and it seemed that was where we were expected to sign to seal the contract. Just then, Marie pouted her lips.

"I'm glad they have high expectations of us, but I don't know if we should accept this. Something about this bothers me."

"I feel the same way. It sounded like they wanted us to be part of the main forces, and it'll be more dangerous than ever before. Seems like Puseri and the others are going to hold a meeting about it, but they're probably going to accept." It seemed their team was still struggling with financial concerns, having just reformed under new management. Although they no longer had Zarish, they would likely want to succeed in their mission with their pride on the line as the top team.

I looked to my side to find Marie was still pouting. And yet, when I reached out, her fingers intertwined with my own. She squeezed my hand even while maintaining that displeased expression. She was probably doing it subconsciously, but the way she rubbed my hand with her thumb kind of tickled.

"So, did you find out why you feel so bothered about all this?"

"Hmm... Well, I suppose it's because I don't understand why they shut down the borders just because someone might smuggle out Magic Stones. They may be valuable, but I doubt they're so valuable that they would risk the entire country for them. And another thing; even if they need a small team of elites, we're still far too few. These two points have been nagging at my mind. What exactly are Magic Stones in the first place, anyway?"

Ah, so Marie was wondering the same thing. From what we had heard earlier, it seemed like Aja was implying the border restriction wouldn't be lifted unless we were able to capture the rebels trying to smuggle out the Magic Stones. These stones were supposedly that important, but we still didn't know what they were. As I considered this, Marie seemed to come to a realization, and her pretty, purple eyes turned toward me.

"Say, didn't we get a Magic Stone before?"

"Oh, I completely forgot about that! We left it at Mewi's workshop to have it

refined,” I replied, and Marie puffed out her cheeks with that displeased look again. Even the cat in her arms was giving me a mocking look... Wait, hadn’t they forgotten about it too?

“Let’s go visit the workshop now. Maybe we’ll learn something, and I’m starting to wonder more and more about the Magic Stones.”

“Yeah, let’s do that. We still have time until we need to give our reply, anyway.” Marie took me by the hand, and I got lost in her dazzling smile and white hair.

The long, straight stretch of road, the pure blue sky... This desert country was somewhat reminiscent of summer in Japan. As the sun rose directly above, I walked along the sun-shaded path with Marie.

He seemed to be careful not to damage it.

Something covered in a wrap was cautiously carried over to us in Mewi’s furry hands. He then placed it on the table, and we all leaned over to look. The lump wrapped in cloth was about the size of a fist, and it felt hard to the touch. Then, those cat-like eyes looked right up at me.

“Master Kazuhiho, would you be so kind as to close that window?” I responded to Mewi’s androgynous voice, then headed over to the window.

I moved over the wooden boards to block off the sunlight from the window, and the workshop was filled with darkness. Then, I looked around to find many Magic Stones, glinting like stars in the night sky.

In the back of the workshop, Mewi called over at us while digging through something.

“The funny thing is, there are so-called winners and losers.”

“Wait, among Magic Stones? So they’re not all the same?”

“Well... Ah, there’s Elixia.” With that, the little Neko hopped up. This darkness probably didn’t bother him at all, considering his superior night vision.

We had visited Mewi’s workshop right away, and we found out he had already finished refining the Magic Stone. The building was dim, due to the door

being closed, but we weren't too bothered by the darkness with the pale light emitting from the cloth-covered Magic Stone. I felt someone tug at my sleeve and turned around to find Marie's large eyes staring at me.

"There's something strange about this. It's supposed to be a magical medium, but it feels more like... it's circulating."

"Umm... I'm having trouble understanding this. Does this have something to do with the winners and losers Mewi mentioned earlier?"

A furry hand reached up on the table, and Mewi's head peeked over. There seemed to be some sort of fluid in the transparent bottle he was holding. He met my gaze with his clear eyes, then responded to Marie's comment.

"Yes, the losers are mere catalysts that augment magical power. So, you may ask, what is a winner? The ones that circulate, as you put it... Yes, these ones are alive."

Did that mean there were dead ones and live ones? Mewi must have figured it would be easier to show us, rather than explain, and he picked up the piece of cloth. We couldn't help but raise our voices in surprise.

"Wow, such a pretty turquoise! It's even more transparent than before... like it's shining from the inside."

"Yes, this one is incredibly valuable. I have seen many Magic Stones, but it is quite rare for them to be this beautiful." I didn't know how its beauty was significant here, but Mewi certainly had an eye for appraising Magic Stones. It seemed this one was pretty much first-class in quality.

"From what I can tell, there are several Magic Stones mixed within this one. Compatible stones can merge with one another over many years. Its purity was increased even further through refinement and enhancement. I do not know what its capacities are now as a result." Mewi had become so capable in the time we had been away. He was always so timid before, but he had quickly changed since learning to speak and earning a profession.

Although his voice was like that of a child's, his speech was confident and concise. His explanation made him seem like some sort of mystical jeweler, which gave the workshop a sort of luxurious feel to it. It made me want to treat

him as a shopkeeper and say “But it’s expensive, isn’t it?” as a joke. Of course, Mewi didn’t ask for a high price tag as payment, and he instead handed me a piece of paper.

“Hm? What is this?”

“This is a permit from Aja the Great to possess the Magic Stone, so please do not lose it.”

I didn’t realize he had done such prep work for us already. Come to think of it, it was the Magic Stones that were prohibited from being taken out of the country, and Mewi’s workshop was full of them. Aja must have realized a permit like this would have been needed. But it seemed there was more procedure for us to go through.



“The Magic Stone must be registered with an owner. It is possible to register multiple owners, but... what would you like to do?”

Honestly, I didn't know what registration would do, or what Magic Stones even were in the first place. But this was what we had come to find out, so I raised my hand to volunteer for now. Marie also raised her hand, confirming that the both of us would be registered. The black cat curled up on the table was just a familiar, rather than Wridra's own body, which may have been why it decided to opt out.

“Then, I ask that the both of you place your fingers on the Magic Stone. I will pour a drop of Elixia, making it so you can touch the stone directly.” We pressed our pointer fingers against the Magic Stone as we were told.

As both of us touched the highly pure precious stone, Mewi brought the clear bottle closer. A single drop fell upon my finger, then Marie's, and the liquid ran down from our fingernails to the tips. As the Elixia seeped between the stone and our fingers, before I knew it, I felt the stone growing warmer.

“There, you are now both registered with the Magic Stone. So, I will begin the incubation now,” Mewi said.

“Wait, incubation? Don't tell me...” I asked.

“Could it be that it's not a precious stone, but more like some sort of egg?” Marie added. Mewi smiled, seemingly pleased by our surprise. The expression reminded me of a certain mischievous black cat that lived in my room.

A gust of wind blew under the blue sky.

With the rainy season having passed us, the wind was growing drier by the day. The winds would soon be more like that of a desert country again. Such thoughts crossed my mind as the Magic Stone was raised above our heads. It grew even more transparent, almost as if it was about to melt into thin air.

I wondered what Mewi meant by “incubation.” And yet, I did just as he instructed us, fearfully throwing the stone into the air. Then, instead of landing on the riverbed and shattering into pieces, it froze in mid-air.

I was taken by surprise by the strong, sudden gust, but I was even more shocked by what I saw when I opened my eyes. There, a big, bug-like creature was floating in the air.

“Whoa, that surprised me. Is that a bug? A plane?”

“Ah, it’s floating a bit off of the ground. Maybe it’s those vibrating wings.”

Whatever it was, it was the color of dried sand, with what seemed like the spread wings of a bird. At the tips of those wings, there were multiple layers of transparent feathers. The feathers vibrated finely, seemingly keeping the creature balanced as it wavered in the air.

“What a large winged insect! I have never seen a flight type this big!” It seemed the Magic Stone was unusual even by Mewi’s standards. But since he called it a “flight type,” maybe there were other types, too. More importantly, I decided to observe the Magic Stone now that its incubation was complete.

There was a span of about four meters between both wings. Something like antennas protruded from what seemed to be its head, and the way it wiggled really did remind me of winged insects.

I lowered myself to the ground and peered up at its abdomen area to find there were several legs extending from it in a row. I tried poking at its body with a finger, and felt it was hard to the touch, almost like an animal’s bone.

“This is a manifestation of the Magic Stone, and it will go back to its stone form when you order it to ‘return.’ It will move in response to the contractor’s words and will. You should be able to control it freely once you get used to it.”

“I’ve never done anything like that, so it may be difficult to get a grasp of it. Hmm, can you try flying higher?” It made a strange *roon* sound, then vibrated its transparent wings quicker. Then, as we watched, it flew up about ten meters above the ground. Marie shaded her eyes with her hand as she looked straight up, her eyes sparkling with wonder.

“Woow... This is strangely moving.”

“It’s like we’re using a giant remote-controlled toy. I wonder if it can go back to its original position.” It made that same strange sound, then descended to where it was before flying up. It decelerated as it came closer to the ground,

perhaps out of an instinct to prevent crashing into the ground.

Then, Marie seemed to notice something and poked the bug on its head.

“Oh, are these little beady things its eyes? It’s so big, but it’s kind of cute.”

“Yeah, it’s not scary at all. It even makes a sort of silly sound.”

But watching this bug, I couldn’t help but feel an inquisitiveness growing inside me. Its size, its flat back... It was almost as if... I glanced at Marie, and our eyes met. Judging from the excitement in her expression, I had a feeling she was thinking the same thing.

“Hey...” Marie beckoned me over, and I moved my face closer. Then, she placed a hand to my ear and whispered. “Doesn’t it seem like we could ride it?”

“Ha ha, it does. I wonder what Wridra thinks of that?” The black cat turned around to face us. It nodded repeatedly, letting us know that it agreed wholeheartedly. Ride? Don’t ride? There was no question about it. It got our curiosity all riled up, after all. And so, we decided to approach the winged insect.

I placed one foot onto it. It didn’t budge.

I slowly put my weight on it, but it just slightly increased the pace of its vibrating wings. I went ahead and put my full weight on it... and it just kept hovering in the air.

The others, who were watching the whole thing, gave me a round of applause. Though, Mewi’s clapping was muffled from all the fur.

I called Marie over, who was so excited her face was flushed, and she held my hand. She crawled on all fours in her robe, and the bug vibrated its wings faster still.

“I-It’s pretty stable. I thought it would be more rocky.”

“Take a look. It seems to be adjusting its buoyancy with its wings. It did the same thing when I got on. Now, would you mind going up a little higher?” It made that *roon* sound again, as if in reply, and then I felt a sense of floating immediately. We felt ourselves going gradually higher, and Marie frantically grabbed onto my thigh.

“Ah, ah, ahhh! We’re floating a bit!”

“Hmm, we’re only about a meter high. Wridra, can you hop on from there?” I asked the black cat, which came running up the riverbed and jumped onto Marie’s back as if it had been waiting for the invitation. Once secured onto Marie’s shoulders with its claws, the cat and Marie each turned their eyes of marble and amethyst to me respectively.

“Let’s go along this river for now. That way, we’d be okay even if we fall off.”

“Oh, no, that would be no good. I’m not a very good swimmer. Please make sure we don’t fall off,” Marie replied.

Huh, I hadn’t known that. That was one fact I didn’t know about her. Considering she was an elf that grew up in a forest, I’d completely assumed she knew how to swim in a river. Maybe that meant that she wouldn’t be able to enjoy the sea, even if we went. In any case, I decided to worry about that later. If she wanted to learn how to swim, we could always go to the pool to practice. And so, I decided to focus on the flight test with the bug for now.

“Then, would you prefer I fly off on my own?”

“It’s hard to say. I would like to watch from here because I’m scared, but I may regret it later if I give up a chance to fly for the first time. You could end up bragging about it later, too,” Marie mumbled, though I had no intention of bragging. She was still pretty much in a crawling position as she internally debated some more. I wasn’t sure if it really was necessary to think so hard about it, but girls could be quite complicated. Then, she finally came to a decision.

“Okay, I’ve decided. I’m getting on, too. This isn’t because I’m jealous of you or anything. It’s just that I need to report about the Magic Stone to the guild. Oh, Mewi, come here so I can hold you.”

“Hm? Ah, okay. Are you certain? I would not want to interrupt your important research.”

“It’s fine. It’s not because I’m scared or anything. I just want to feel your soft fur. Ahh, so warm...” Marie held Mewi’s hand and pulled him toward her chest. He seemed rather confused, but like I mentioned before, girls were complicated

creatures.

“Now, let’s try going up slowly,” I said.

“Yes, very slowly. Slow and steady enough to make us yawn, okay?”

... *Roon*. The Magic Stone responded after a short delay. It must have needed a moment to think about it, considering Marie’s confusing order.

It was time for the first flight to begin. I held Marie in my arms as she sat there in a curled up position, and she let out a squeak as the ground grew farther away. It seemed holding Mewi wasn’t enough, because she squeezed her soft body against mine as she held on for dear life.

“Nnh! This is pretty scary!” Marie closed her eyes, unable to bear the sensation of floating, and I could feel her trembling. The black cat looked around, unimpressed, seemingly unfazed by the meager heights. Although the Arkdragon could fly freely through the air, flying with anything other than their own wings must have been an unusual experience.

“Okay, let’s move along the river now. Look, Marie, the view is so nice. Why don’t you open your eyes?”

“W-Wait, it’s a bit scary not standing on solid footing!” I was kind of glad that she clung on to me so tightly. Not just because she was a cute girl, but because I felt like I was really being relied upon. Of course, she did usually depend on me already, but she was the type to endure things whenever possible.

I didn’t want her to hold back when it came to these things. I definitely preferred for her to tell me all the things she liked and wanted to do. To be honest, I would have probably tried to grant pretty much anything she wished for. And so, I spoke to her in a gentler tone than usual in an attempt to take away her fear. She just needed a bit of courage to open her eyes and see a whole different world in front of her.

“Here, Marie, I’ll support you. No need to be afraid. Can you try opening your eyes slowly for me?”

“Y-Yes, I’m okay. I’m fine. I feel a little calmer listening to your voice.” I could feel her warm breath on my neck, and she slowly opened her amethyst eyes, framed by long eyelashes.

It was as if I was watching the moment flowers bloomed. Then, she witnessed the long stretch of river with greenery on both banks, along with flowering succulents now that the rainy season had just passed.

“Wow...!” It was quite a wondrous sight. We could see the river flowing beneath us from the same point of view as birds in flight. The wind gently caressed our cheeks, and both Marie and Mewi were at a loss for words.

I glanced to the creature’s side to find the wings vibrating rapidly, adjusting its flight speed as needed. The Magic Stone was much easier to control than I had imagined, and I hardly heard or felt the wings as they flapped. In fact, the sound of the flowing river was far louder. Marie turned in her seat.

“Hee hee, this feels strange. I feel very fortunate to be here.”

“This was an unexpected gift from Zera, but I think we’ll have a lot of fun with this Magic Stone. It’s useful and easy to control. Now we know why they went out of their way to impose the border restriction.” I was starting to understand just what the Magic Stones were and why they had to be prevented from being smuggled out of the country.

They were far too easy and convenient to use.

Obtaining a skill required a great amount of time to train, but these could be acquired without any need for talent or effort. In other words, the more people and Magic Stones a country had, the more powerful it would be.

As a desert country, Arilai didn’t have too high of a population. If the Magic Stones were to be taken out of the country and used elsewhere, it would have put the entire country at risk.

“So that’s why Aja the Great gave us that permit,” Marie whispered with her arms still around me. Mewi and I tilted her heads in confusion, and she went on to explain. “I mean, we wouldn’t think of any other way to use these stones but for recreation, right? Like for finding a nice spot to eat some lunch, for example.”

Mewi raised his arms and cheered in excitement, which made me laugh out loud. Marie was right. We had no interest in joining a war or using the Magic Stones to make money. I mean, we cared more about keeping all the delicious

food to ourselves than all that.

After laughing for some time, I looked up at the sky. There were a few clouds present there, and now that the rainy season was over, the weather was becoming more like that of a desert.

“I just realized something. I think we’ve cleared one of the problems we were facing.” It was Marie’s turn to widen her eyes. She tilted her head and stared at me, as if to urge me to explain. I smiled at her.

“I mean, about us making a farm on the second floor. We needed some way to get up there...”

“Ah! We can get there easily now!” We pointed at each other at the same time and beamed. Everything was moving along nicely now, and all we could do was laugh as our issues were getting resolved one after another. There was still some distance to the oasis. It would have taken several hours to get there even if I had used Trayn, the Journey’s Guide, and it would have taken a whole day to get there by foot.

“Oh, this is a good opportunity. Let’s test how fast and far we can fly. We can gaze at the sand stretching across the horizon as we scatter some pumpkin seeds. I’d love to simmer them in some soy sauce once they grow.” Huh, it seemed she still remembered the simmered pumpkin dish we had a while back. Marie smiled as she recalled the warm, soft texture of the hearty simmered dish. She then looked down and spoke again.

“Also, Magic Stone isn’t a very cute name. Is it okay if I call you Roon?”

...*Roon*? The upward inflection in the response made me burst out in laughter. The creature’s beady eyes glinted in the sunlight, and it flapped its wings, as if to show its approval. Maybe it would be nice to go on a long stroll every once in a while. The desert sun would be rough, but Marie had the ability to control spirits to make the temperature more manageable, after all.

“Let’s see, what else would we need...? Maybe some drinks, like fruit juice?” I asked.

“Hmm, it would be great if we could play some music. Maybe we could also get some handrails, chairs, and something like a seatbelt.”

“Ah, music would be nice. The wind would have specs of sand in it, so we’d need to do something about that, too. Also, it would be nice if the ice spirit could chill our drinks.”

The excitement of having this discussion reminded me of preparing for a school trip. Thanks to the money we acquired from the ancient labyrinth, we could do all the shopping we wanted. I wasn’t too interested in gaining money in this world, but it was a different story when it involved recreation.

“Okay, it’s decided. Let’s go to the shopping district and get what we need. Hee hee, I just love shopping. I can’t wait! Hmm, the shopping district should be that... way?!” The moment Marie looked down, her smile vanished. The change was sudden and sharp, and I heard her let out a strange “Oof” at the same time.

“So high! We’re way higher up than I thought! I’m sorry, never mind! I bit off a bit more than I can chew! I’m actually very afraid of heights! Ahhh, I can’t! Help me, Kazuhiho!”

Uh oh. Marie sat there with her legs bent at her sides, her long ears drooping down. She turned to me, whining and nearly in tears... and for some reason, I felt a flutter in my chest. Marie clung on to me in a fluster, but all I could think about was how cute she was.

“There, there...” I said, patting her on the back reassuringly.

But due to the fear she had experienced, the rest of the flight test went on with safety and comfort as the top priority.

I considered that this would be quite the shopping trip as we descended to the ground. Roon made that strange, familiar sound as it circled in the air to land.

Chapter of Midsummer, Episode 4: Shopping During a Sky Voyage

“Here is your aplai flowering tea.”

“Thank you. Wow, this smells nice.” I received the bowl from the street stall, and I was enveloped in a strong, flowery scent. The tea in this desert country had a characteristically strong aroma, and Marie and I frequently enjoyed it when resting.

I held a bowl in each hand, and when I turned around, my eyes met with Marie’s, who was watching over our belongings. She did a little wave with her hand, and I approached her while avoiding the other people, so as to not spill the tea. We then walked over to the shade by the side of the vegetable stall and took a seat together.

“Thank you. Mmm, it smells so good. You can’t find this kind of scent even in Japan,” Marie noted.

“I think Japanese people aren’t big fans of strong smells. They tend not to pair well with food, and we aren’t really used to it. Flowers are a big part of the culture here in Arilai. Just like those offerings we saw at the Manor of Black Roses, there are a lot of flowers being cultivated here. It’s kind of odd, considering we’re in the middle of the desert.”

Polypetalous flowers could be seen on the bottom of the bowl, giving it a cute accent. I found the culture distinct to each region fascinating, and those variations were some of my favorite things to experience in my travels. We had tried various tea leaves in Japan, and I came to find out that Marie was a fan of strong-smelling tea.

I took a sip of the lukewarm tea, and the scent of flowers passed through my nostrils. It felt as if the scent helped alleviate a small portion of the heat. Just then, a semi-transparent jellyfish appeared in the air before us. It latched on to Marie’s finger like a baby, then moved closer to our earthenware bowls.

“Hey there. You’re that ice spirit, aren’t you? Thanks for all the help you’ve been giving us.” I touched it with my finger, and it was cool to the touch. The spirit, which had been a godsend during Japan’s summer, immediately chilled the bowl upon coming in contact with it. As expected, the tea was cold when I took a sip, and the desert heat was staved off even further. It seemed we were starting to learn how to live comfortably in the desert before we knew it.

It was obvious from all of the belongings we were carrying around that we had just finished shopping. We lined up some leather straps, a saddle for two like those used on camels, and woven baskets in front of us. Our plan was to put them on Roon the Magic Stone, and if all went well, we would fly straight to the ancient labyrinth.

“Ahhh, shopping is so fun!” Marie stretched, and my eyes were naturally drawn to her bare skin peeking out from under her clothes. She was so full of life as we went around several general goods stores to check out their wares, and I reaffirmed in my mind that women really did love shopping after all.

“Do people ever tell you it’s strange that an elf loves shopping so much?”

“Oh, that’s a prejudiced view, you know. Some elves are just like humans, and I just enjoy evaluating and picking out items. It’s not as if I have wasteful habits or anything.” She leaned against me with her shoulder, then placed her head on me for some reason. I could see there was sweat on her head as she rested it on my shoulder, and it wasn’t the scent of flowering tea I smelled, but the sweet smell of Marie herself.

“Hee hee, this is fun. Not just the shopping, but we’re going on a desert date on Roon after this, right? Oh, I can’t wait! Let’s stock up on some tasty drinks later.” I couldn’t help but smile at her happy expression. She was just so adorable. I already knew full well how cute Marie was, but I was powerless when she was so affectionate and full of excitement in contrast to her usual serious demeanor.

But the moment didn’t last long. Her expression grew cloudy soon after, and she looked rather annoyed. The reason being...

“Ahh, what a coincidence. If it isn’t Kazuhiho and Marie. Woo, get a room, you two! Hey Doula, check it out. We should be all lovey-dovey like those tw—

urgh!”

“You really are an idiot. There are no horses around, so I’ll kick you to death instead!” The woman delivered a knee into Zera’s stomach, and I saw his face on the verge of vomiting up close, completely ruining the sweet mood from moments ago. I watched as emotion faded from Marie’s expression.

“Doula, and Zera... Ha ha, funny seeing you two here,” I said.

“Ohh? Kazuhiho, I’ve never seen you look so glum. Gah ha ha, didn’t mean to interrupt the two of ya. My bad!” The tall man speaking in an aloof tone was the person we just so happened to save from the ancient labyrinth, and we had helped each other many times since. He was cheerful and friendly for someone who was from a prestigious family, though he sometimes had a tendency to be a bit too frank.

Zera noticed all of the things we had purchased, then poked the woven basket and asked, “What’s with all this stuff? Oh, you two finally decided to start living with each other, huh? Where did you buy your house?”

“Oh, no, we were thinking of putting these on our ride.”

Though, we had been living together in Japan for a long time now. Marie was unfazed, and she and Doula exchanged looks that said “Yup, he’s a fool,” and “Agreed.” Zera crouched down in front of me, unconcerned by the women’s wordless conversation.

“Hey, let me know if you’re looking to buy a house. The Thousand household is actually pretty well known, so I think I can hook you up with some nice property. There are a lot of places around here that outsiders don’t know about. You’ll regret it if you end up buying a bad one.”

Marie and I exchanged looks. Come to think of it, we had been saving a good deal of money, and I felt like we could buy a house if we weren’t too picky about it. I had thought we would have only been staying in this country temporarily, but I was starting to feel guilty about being taken care of at the manor. Though, there was one big reason we couldn’t buy a house.

“Oh, never mind. You two aren’t from this country, huh?”

“Right, so the best we could do is rent a house.” We weren’t from Arilai, so

we couldn't get our own land here. But not owning a house also meant we could visit other countries on a whim, which was a nice advantage to have.

"Well, you can always come stay at my place whenever you want. Actually, why don't you just join my team? Then you could stay at my place without feeling bad about it."

"No! If you're going to join a team, you should join mine. Otherwise, even your brain would end up being nothing but muscle, like Zera's." I thought we were here to go shopping, but for some reason, we were being recruited into other teams. Though, these two were planning to get married, so I assumed their teams were going to get merged anyway. As I wondered about this, Marie softly whispered to me.

"Say, why don't you bring up that special mission with them? Zera may be like this, but he can be dependable in a way, right?" She had a point; it would have been a good idea to gather information for our mission. I was curious about their situation, and we still hadn't had lunch yet. Since we were here, it may have been a good idea to go to the nearby rest area.

And so, I decided to talk to Zera.

There were rest areas all around the road, making it easy for shoppers to eat food they bought from the stalls right away. But Marie wasn't a fan of the spices used around here, so we usually brought our own boxed meals.

You just had to pay a small fee to have a thick blanket laid out for you, so you could sit with your legs crossed and enjoy some delicious food there. The tea shop from earlier was walking around to sell to customers, so we had no issues getting drinks. The seat under the tree shade was a bit pricey, but Zera paid for us this time.

A dopey-looking sign that read "Kazuhiho" was put on our belongings, and the black cat munched away at some food on its plate.

"I heard about the raid team being reformed from the old man. He stopped by my house not too long ago, and I thought there was something fishy about it, so I went on a walk to talk to Doula about it." Our eyes widened. So Aja had gone to see Zera after visiting us. That meant he had visited Puseri from Team Diamond, Zera from Team Bloodstone, Doula from Team Andalusite, and our

Team Amethyst.

What surprised me was that Zera thought this situation was dubious, just like Marie did. I thought a skilled fighter like him would have been totally onboard, but he furrowed his brow as he took a big bite of his chicken. Doula seemed to find his reaction strange as well, and she looked at him as she licked some oil off of her fingers.

“Fishy how? Tell me what your instinct tells you.”

“Well, let’s see... If they need elite fighters, my dad’s Team White Beryl would be the strongest in the kingdom. They’re even stronger than Team Diamond, now that Zarish is gone. But the old man didn’t pay them a visit. This mission is a direct order from the king, right? That explanation was iffy, too. And why did the king put in a request like this in the first place? He seems more concerned about the hiding bandits than the treasure, and our troops would drop from about three hundred men to fifty. This has fishy written all over it.”

Marie and I were impressed. Although Zera spoke and acted like a child at times, his instincts were extremely sharp when it came to anything related to combat. This was likely a skill he had acquired as a leader. There was a glint in his eyes under his short, black hair as he opened his mouth to speak again.

“A small team of elites may sound good, but it would be pointless if there’s no coordination. You two haven’t even worked with Team Diamond before, have you?”

“No, never. We haven’t even seen them fight.” We had been pretty close since that incident, but he was right about us never seeing them in combat. And considering how the higher leveled teams hadn’t been called on, Marie may have been right when she said there were far too few teams being recruited, even if they were going for a small team of elites.

What could all this have meant? My theory about the possibility that they were trying to preserve their main forces was starting to seem more likely. But at the same time, this begged the question as to why. Maybe they were considering enemies other than those in the ancient labyrinth.

I chewed on some rice balls as I considered this further, and then Zera spoke.

“Come to think of it, my old man has been out and about a lot lately. Maybe he’s been getting summoned by the royal family, but... hmm, we haven’t really talked since the engagement.”

“Ah, you two got engaged? Congratulations!” The usually sober-looking Doula blushed a bit upon hearing my words of congratulation. Her fiery red hair was tied back, and there was a sort of feminine air to the way she averted her steel-colored eyes.

“Ngh! D-Don’t be a fool. I won’t marry into Zera’s house until much later.”

“Hm? But we’re already living together, so what’s wrong with congratulating us?”

“Hey! You didn’t need to mention that... I get embarrassed sometimes too, you know...” Doula turned a deeper shade of red, but I didn’t really understand why. Marie and I lived together too, and there wasn’t anything embarrassing about... In that moment, the sight of Marie with her bath towel undone and the times we had kissed each other flashed into my mind.

“Urgh...! Don’t, look right now...”

“Ah, sorry...” We immediately looked away, and I felt like I understood why Doula had reacted the way she did.

As for the black cat, it was eating away at some food with its butt pointed toward us. The negative aura in the air and the sound of plates loudly clinking told me that Wridra was probably going to harass us for this later on.



After we finished eating, Doula and Zera followed us to the riverbed.

They were interested in the flight-type Magic Stone and wanted to see it in person. If I was in their shoes, I definitely would have wanted to see it, too. And so, I had Roon emerge from the Magic Stone like it had earlier, and when it revealed its sand-colored skin, the two drew closer with great interest.

“Whoa, so this is the Magic Stone I gave you guys. This is really cool.”

“I wonder how it flies... Mariabelle, have you figured how it works?” Doula asked. The two touched it and asked more questions without reservation, and they even helped us put the riding gear we bought earlier onto Roon.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t know much yet either. It’s closer to a monster than a creature, and we haven’t had a chance to do much research into flying insects.”

“Oh, I see. I don’t think these wings are powerful enough to support its flight, so maybe it’s powered by magic or some sort of flying arts. How curious.”

The women went on with their lively discussion. Zera and I couldn’t keep up with it at all, so we focused on the physical labor. We were split between the intellectuals and physical labor sides, but I hereby declared my brain wasn’t made of muscles. Though, all I really knew how to do was swing my sword.

Anyway, I was glad to have an adult like Zera helping me. The process required a lot of physical work, and considering how big Roon was, I wouldn’t have been able to handle it myself. I tied the leather strap tight and secured the saddle for two. We couldn’t use nails for obvious reasons, so straps were our only option. I was sweating profusely as we worked under the blazing sun. Then, Zera flashed his pearly white teeth.

“Ahh, this is so much fun! I lose track of time when I start working with my hands, you know?”

“I know how you feel. It’s really exciting when your work starts coming together.” I thought it would have been some intense physical labor, but we were making great progress, thanks to our combined efforts. Once the saddle was secured tightly, we went on to install the footholds, life line, and storage area for our bags.

Roon had its wings spread out, but it didn't have many moving parts, other than its transparent feathers. This meant that we could tie it up with ropes without worrying about restricting its mobility, but we did have to consider weight distribution and wind resistance.

"All right, I think that does it. You should be fine as long as you don't go way too fast."

"We did it! Thank you so much for your help." I bowed, and Zera placed his hand on my head. He started rubbing my head roughly, and I started to get dizzy from the sheer force of his strength.

"Don't worry about it. You know, I think of you as my little brother. I wasn't kidding when I invited you to my team, and I'm more than happy to take on that special mission. Let's take it easy, yeah? So no need for the formalities and being reserved and all that."

I blinked. He would probably have been about the same age as I was in Japan, but he was a man who led a massive team, and he came from a respected family line. Yet, he didn't act like snobbish in the slightest, and his smile showed just how genuine of a person he was. Doula's face appeared next to his, wearing a similar, friendly smile.

"Yes, as I mentioned before, there's no need to be modest. That's why I'm going to start calling Mariabelle, 'Marie.' By the way, I've taken a liking to calling you, 'Sleepyhead,' so that'll be your name from now on."

Urgh... It was just my face that looked sleepy, so I would've preferred a different name. Doula seemed to notice the hesitance in my expression and smiled gently.

"Would you prefer I call you 'Phantom' instead?"

"Ah! No, thank you. Sleepyhead is fine!" Doula laughed cheerfully. She had seemed a bit high-strung when we first met, so I found it interesting how much people could change. I thought that maybe it was thanks to the man next to her, and I relaxed as I spoke again.

"Thank you, I'll keep that in mind. We haven't decided whether to take on that special mission yet, but let's do our best if we end up working in the

labyrinth together.”

“All right, that’s the spirit! I still think there’s something fishy about this job, but it’ll be fun as long as you’ll be there. That’s just my hunch, anyway.”

Marie lowered her head, looking a bit nervous. “Um, in that case, I’ll be sure to voice my complaints without holding back if Zera says anything dumb or gets in our way. Is that okay, Doula?”

“Of course. You would be doing me a favor if you knock this dummy down a peg and set him straight.”

“Hey now, we were just talking about working together in the ancient labyrinth! Why are you all ganging up on me?” Seeing Zera look rather glum, we all burst into laughter.

Now, it was time for us to depart.

We were a bit reluctant to go, but we had to leave soon if we wanted to make it to the ancient labyrinth before sundown. I wore the desert goggles we had prepared and sat in the back seat. Marie and the black cat turned around to face me from the front. Doula and Zera smiled reassuringly at us from below.

“See ya later! Reach out to us if you need anything!”

“We will! Also, we hope you invite us for the wedding!”

We smiled as Doula’s face turned red immediately, then gave the order to the Magic Stone. Its transparent wings vibrated rapidly and we flew off, leaving a column of water in our wake.

We rose about ten meters into the air, and the scenery changed completely. A sand-colored cityscape that seemed nice to live in and a stretch of desert land appeared before us. I raised my voice in fascination, but Marie still clung to my arms in fear.

“Ahhh, we’re so high up! I feel butterflies in my stomach!”

She scooted her butt closer to mine and pressed against me, seemingly feeling helpless.

“Hold me tighter,” she ordered as she turned toward me. I pulled her thin waist toward me and left no space between us, which seemed to give her the

comfort she was seeking. She let out a sigh of relief.

“Good, I should be able to manage now. Keep up the good work, Mr. Seatbelt. Also, I hope we’re not too heavy for Roon.”

Apparently, I was now recognized as a seatbelt. But not only did I not mind, I was pretty happy with my position. I got to hug a cute girl like Marie, after all. The Magic Stone seemed unconcerned, too, and it just responded with that *roon* sound as it vibrated its wings. It seemed to say “No problem at all!” Judging from the wide smile on Marie’s face, she was all ready to go. And so, we were off to enjoy the journey through the sky toward the ancient labyrinth.

I gave the order, and Roon glided through the air.

It was the very picture of a fantasy world. I looked all around me as I considered the thought.

The desert stretched far across the horizon, and the vastness of the blue sky reminded me of space itself. Sailing through the skies on a hatched Magic Stone was quite a rare experience in Japan... Actually, it was pretty rare here, too.

The saddle was secure thanks to the leather straps, and it didn’t seem like it would come loose from a bit of speed or shaking. I could tell Marie was growing less tense as she held me, perhaps thanks to the footholds we had installed. She was gradually getting used to it.

Her white hair flowed loosely, and she turned to me with her goggles over her eyes. I could see her mouth flapping, but it was hard to hear her with the wind blowing in my ears. Still, I figured out what she was trying to tell me right away.

Something floated around her finger, and I realized they were white feathers.

They clung on to her finger, refusing to be blown away, and their numbers increased as time went on. Once a good amount of them gathered up, she blew on them, scattering them into the air like dandelion fluff. But Roon suddenly went off-balance and wavered as the wind blew loudly. I quickly held Marie in my arms as the turbulence shook us.

“Oh, it seems we’ve lost our balance after all. If we think of this like an airplane ride... that would make you the control tower. I want you to guide us so nothing gets in Roon’s way.” She poked the air with her fingertip, causing a

swirl of current there. Then, a white bird emerged from that point. It had a comb atop its head, and it stared with its beady eyes. It tilted its head, as if taking in its master's orders.

The order was a highly advanced one. It had been tasked with adjusting the windbreak in a streamline shape to make our flight more stable. Marie took her staff, which had been secured to the footing, and sent her magic into the bird, then gave it an encouraging pat on its comb. It gave out an energetic cry, ran off, then flew into the air.

I cheered in surprise. The wind that had been blowing so violently stopped completely. Marie turned around with a sly smile on her face, and all I could do was pat her on the head.

"That's amazing! I knew you were a genius, Marie."

"Hee hee, you're complimenting me too much. Is it really that amazing? I didn't think it was that impressive."

"You say that, but you know even the other elves can't do this," I said. She had been playing it cool just a moment ago, but her smile immediately returned again. The sun was still shining strong despite having set quite a bit, and the bird from earlier flew ahead of us. After smiling at each other for some time, we both looked up at the bird at once.

"We can finally talk again. We could probably even soften the sunlight with some help from light spirits." There was no doubting how impressive Marie was. We were able to live through the hellish summer heat without an air conditioner thanks to her incredible skills in handling spirits. But she did it out of a desire to live comfortably, so it was hard to say whether she was a hard worker or a loafer.

I could hear her negotiating with the spirit with that same cheery tone from earlier. The language of elves sounded like a beautiful song, so I couldn't help but listen. The negotiation with the light spirit ended quickly, and it was as if we were immediately shaded under a leafy tree.

"I did it! Hee hee, now we can enjoy the desert skies to the fullest." Marie removed her goggles and let out a big yawn. She then turned to me halfway, smiling at me in wait of my compliments, with the black cat peeking out of her

robe. Her eyes were alight with curiosity, and she turned to the side to take in the sight.

“Oh, wow! Look, look, the desert looks so beautiful from above. I hated it so much when we were walking on foot... I guess I’m quick to change my mind when it suits me.”

“But I’ve never traveled in such comfort like this before. At this rate, we might not even need the fruit juice we prepared.” Marie made a face, as if to say she *would* be drinking that, and I chuckled. I brought it out of the bag and stuck a straw-shaped twig into it. The jellyfish-like spirit came floating up to us and chilled the drink for us, making me realize all at once that I pretty much didn’t have to do any work.

I slowly looked at my surroundings as we continued to fly with that unique *roorooroo...* sound in the background.

The winding snake-shaped river was called the Dry River due to it usually being dry like its name suggested. The bright, sandy region ahead was known as the Gabalia Desert, and it was full of life despite its seemingly barren appearance. As I explained such things to Marie, the sun continued to set further and further.

An ancient mountain dragon wriggled far off on the horizon. It laid in wait with its mouth wide open for the swarm of bats returning to their cave.

“They’ll get eaten if they accidentally mistake it for their cave.”

“My, how scary. They’ll get swallowed up whole if they take a wrong turn? I sure hope we aren’t lost.”

“Don’t worry, we aren’t. We’ve been following the road this whole time. As long as we keep flying this way, we should get to the oasis. We can get there faster if we speed up, but... what do you think?”

“No need to rush. Let’s enjoy the view of the desert and take our time.” Marie leaned on me, and I agreed with her sentiment. Her stomach felt warm against me, and her heart rate was a lot calmer than before. It seemed she was finally able to relax and enjoy our journey in the sky.

Marie looked at me, her long hair wavering gently.

“So, do you want to accept that special mission?”

“Hm... I can’t say for sure yet, but I am curious about what sorts of monsters are on the third floor. Setting the mission aside, I honestly just want to go have fun.”

Marie laughed in response. “Well, I can agree to that. It’s not that I just want to have fun, but the Sorcerer’s Guild would scold me if I just sat by doing nothing. Though, if you insist, I suppose I could play with you a bit.” Marie gestured with her fingers at “a bit,” but I couldn’t help but feel she invited me to go out and play all the time. I gave her a look that said “Didn’t you say you wanted to go to the labyrinth to lose weight?” and she couldn’t hold in her laugh any longer.

“No, that’s not it. I’ve actually been getting a salary for my work, you know. It may seem like I’m just playing around, but it’s all part of my job. In other words, you’re the only unemployed one in this world. So, take that! Are you envious?” Marie’s playful jab was effective, despite her cute face. She was already positioned with her head on my shoulder. It would’ve been no surprise if our lips happened to touch. But her smile was so cheerful and innocent, it felt a bit unfair.

“I wouldn’t want to work even in my dreams. I mean, we both have stable jobs, so don’t you think we’re a good match? We’ve been pretty fortunate getting income without really planning for it, too.”

“Yes, we’ve received plenty of treasure, so I’m grateful that we’re able to live comfortably. That’s why I don’t think we need to go out of our way to take on this mission if we don’t want to. So, how about this? We’ll gladly join the raid team, but we won’t do the special mission,” Marie said, then flashed a grin. As for me, I didn’t ridicule her idea or laugh at it. After gathering information on this for some time, I had come to realize there was more to this mission than met the eye. There had to be some sort of hidden truth and agenda behind the conflict with bandits over the Magic Stones we were led to buy on a surface level.

“Are you saying we should enjoy what we can without getting too caught up on the mission? I don’t mind, of course. Though, maybe my opinion doesn’t

hold much weight, being jobless and all,” I said jokingly in agreement to her suggestion.

Nothing good came from getting greedy. It was much less stressful and fun to go in with the mindset that things would be fine even if we failed. If the mission happened to succeed as a result, then all the better. And so, we decided to return the S-rank mission card without using it.

Our direction had been decided. As long as Aja and Hakam allowed it, we would join the raid on the third floor of the ancient labyrinth. I announced this to Marie, and she smiled with satisfaction.

“I have a feeling every day would be nice and easy if I was with you. Maybe someday, Doula would start calling me Sleepyhead, too.”

“Being really busy at work in Japan is enough for me. I wouldn’t want to be tired even in my dreams. Oh, since we can’t go to the sea here for a while, how about we make a trip to the sea in Japan?” Marie and the black cat turned around immediately. There was clearly expectation in those purple eyes, but there was a strange mixture of modesty there, too.

“I want... to go, but are you okay as far as finances go?”

“Well, a certain elf didn’t ask for a new fan when I got my bonus, so we’re okay on that front. Let’s see... I’d say the sea, a river, or the mountains would all be nice places to visit in the summer.” I asked which one Marie would prefer, and she embraced me with her arms around my neck. Then, she spoke to me with some hesitation.

“I feel like letting you spoil me right now. Is that okay?” It was absolutely okay. In fact, I would have preferred it that way. Marie glanced up at me, then contemplated something. Then, maybe she had given in to temptation, because her lips curled into a smile.

“Have you decided?”

“Yes, I’d love to go on a trip. I think the sea would be nice after all. What do you think, Wridra?”

“Meow, meooow!”

Come to think of it, Kaoruko and I had been deciding the destinations of our trips up until now. Marie and I didn't know much about going on trips, so discussing it with Kaoruko when we got back may not have been a bad idea. And I hadn't told the girls yet, but Obon was approaching soon. It was a wonderful time in which I would get six consecutive days off, including Saturday and Sunday. We had just gone back to Aomori recently, so why not take them where they wanted to go this time?

"It's mostly decided, then. We'll raid the third floor of the ancient labyrinth for fun, then prepare for our trip during the day. Agreed?"

"Yeeeah!"

"Meooow!"

And so, our journey through the sky in the dream world went on with lively excitement.

The route to the oasis was usually a sweaty and miserable ordeal on foot, but it took less than an hour to fly there. We may have even been able to arrive in half the time if we picked up the pace. With the chilled drinks and cheerful humming, the ride had been incredibly enjoyable for me. Though, if you asked me, it *should* have been this comfortable when you remember it was supposed to be a dream world.

I looked down at the ground below and saw a building up ahead. It was the remains of the fortress made for the Magic Stone excavation site. Large mountains laid in wait ahead of us, and we would soon arrive at the oasis where the ancient labyrinth was located. "That was quick!" Marie cheered.

§

"Ah, this is kind of scary..." Marie's voice echoed throughout the ancient labyrinth. The path was brightly lit thanks to the light spirit, but there was no one in sight. In fact, there weren't even any monsters around due to the floor having been cleared. Even the black cat's footsteps sounded loud as it walked around.

"Come to think of it, horror is a big theme of the summer, too. Remember that thing we saw before?"

“Um... Do you mean that horror movie? Wridra seemed to enjoy it too, but I can't understand the appeal. Why would anyone *want* to be scared? And even going so far as to pay money for it.”

The cat meowed as if in protest, or maybe to convince Marie that they were actually quite enjoyable. I could have started telling scary stories here, but she probably would have gotten seriously angry, so I decided against it.

Our shoes clacked against the ground as we walked through the path of the second floor. I thought about how we could have gone straight to our destination if Wridra's main body had been there. But with the lack of enemies to fight and the Magic Tool's map at our disposal, we made our way through with ease.

“We're probably almost there. It must be past six in the evening, so we should sleep as soon as we arrive,” I said.

“Right, today is Monday, isn't it? I was in the vacation spirit, so that's a shame.”

“Well, the excitement leading up to the vacation is part of the fun. I have to work to support myself over there, so we can't do much about that.”

As we continued our conversation, the staircase leading underground grew brighter and brighter. The natural light was like that of the sun, and it had a warmth unbecoming of the ancient labyrinth. The orange light of the evening coming in through the peep holes around the spiral stairs was created by the woman representing life, known as Shirley. Soon enough, we arrived at a hall that was as big as several Tokyo Domes, with a thick, vibrant forest and a flowing river.

“It's a wondrous sight no matter how many times I see it. Hard to believe this place is in the depths of the labyrinth.”

“Hmm, I guess our travel destination is decided,” Marie said. I wondered what she meant and turned to her with a questioning look, and she replied as if the answer was obvious.

“I mean, there's a forest and river here already. With those two already checked off, that means the sea is our only option left for our vacation trip.”

“Ah, I guess you’re right. Then, it might be fun to camp out and have a barbecue while we’re here. Food cooked out in nature becomes all the more delicious, you know.” The other two seemed interested in outdoor cooking, so I decided to tell them more about it as we descended the spiral staircase. I explained the joy of having a meal in the great outdoors, grilling meat and vegetables with a beer in hand, and they gulped audibly.

“Guh...! I hate to admit it, but I’ll end up an overweight elf at this rate.”

“Wha?! I don’t think you need to throw in the towel so early. I’m sure we’ll get plenty of exercise on the third floor, and we’ll be going to the sea, too.” It was important to get plenty of food and exercise. Maybe we were a bit too lax for people who were about to step foot into uncharted territory. Though, if you asked me, there was nothing wrong with a raid team that just cared about having fun all the time.

When we emerged outside—no, out to the second floor’s hall, a footpath surrounded by trees appeared before us. We stepped out onto the soil covered in leaves and glanced up at some wild birds searching for their sleeping spot for the night. When we got through the woods, we arrived at a resting area.

There, we were surprised to find two familiar figures beside the gently flowing river.

The black cat that was leading the way rushed out toward the woman sitting there. Her slender arms scooped up the cat, and her long, black hair swayed as she turned her eyes toward us. The woman was tall like a model, and she had a motherly air about her...

“Ah! Wridra!” Marie sprinted forward, much like the cat had just before her. I was just thinking about the raid on the third floor, but the members of Team Amethyst happened to be assembled now.

The former floor master Shirley was also floating there, so I waved at her as I walked over to my friends. Although she couldn’t speak, she mouthed the words, “Welcome back.”

It had been... about two weeks since my last visit.

The elf and the dragon were reunited as the sun was setting, and their

cheerful, lively voices could be heard. It was strange how happy it made me just watching them get excited to be in each other's company again. Although Wridra was a legendary being, to Marie, she was simply a close friend that she got along well with. There wasn't a hint of fear in her demeanor as she clung to the Arkdragon's side.

"Wridra! Why are you here?"

"Hah, hah, what choice did I have? I could not sit idly by as you planned a Japan trip. Besides, I have been helping Shirley here quite often."

I wondered what she meant by helping Shirley. Maybe with managing the forest here? No, Shirley was once the being that managed the ancient forests and presided over the essence of life, so the help had to be for something else. I decided I would ask about it later.

It seemed Wridra's taste in fashion had changed since spending time in Japan, because she was now wearing a casual attire of shorts and a black tank top instead of her usual heavily armored dress. She wore it very well, but the "dragon" kanji on her chest was riding that fine line between cool and weird.

She didn't have to worry about other people seeing her here, so her draconian ears, horn, and impressive tail were on full display. The tip of her tail twitched up and down, perhaps in response to her emotions. The black-haired beauty grinned in response to Marie's joyful expression.

"Now that you got your so-called bonus, it should be no problem for me to visit you in Japan. You are quite generous, after all. I am certain you would not refuse."

"...Yeah. I hope you'll take it easy on me," I replied, but Marie and Wridra were the best of friends, so it seemed my input didn't have much weight. They went on with their girls' talk, discussing how they wanted to go to the sea for the trip after all.

My eyes were drawn to the transparent hair flowing in the air. I turned around to find Shirley smiling gently. It had been a while since I last saw her, and she seemed more beautiful than ever. Her white, gothic dress closed tight up to her neck. The skirt flared out at the hem, and her shirt covered her down to the sleeves. It seemed the heat didn't bother her in her soul form.

“Hey there, good evening. You undid your hair, huh?”

Her long hair flowed about her as if she was underwater. She kicked off of the ground and weightlessly glided over, then stood next to me. Her beautiful, sky blue eyes moved right up to mine, and I looked up at her at a slight angle. She twirled her hair with her fingers, which told me she was a bit self-conscious.

“I think it looks great on you. The flower hairpin suits you really well, too.” Shirley’s lips curled awkwardly, and she quickly hid her face behind her sleeves. She shyly took one step back, then glanced at me again. I had a feeling she was actually enjoying the compliments.

“Well, I’m sorry to ask for a favor so soon after arriving, but we need to get some rest soon. Would it be okay if we spent some time hanging out here tomorrow?”

Shirley blinked at my question, then nodded right away. I may have imagined that hint of sadness in her expression, but I was a Japanese salaryman. It was almost night here, so it was probably a little before seven in Japan.

There was roughly about twelve hours of time difference between Japan and the dream world. That was why we tended not to be too active at night unless I had no work the next day. Of course, since I was already dreaming, I would feel fully rested when I woke up again.

“So, let’s continue this conversation on the other side. Wridra, would you mind going on a date with Marie during the day?”

“Hm, we shall take a walk through Japan for the first time in quite a while. Come to think of it, it may be a good idea to take photographs of that garden Shirley showed an interest in.”

Shirley immediately turned around in reaction to Wridra’s casual comment. I couldn’t help but burst out laughing upon seeing her rare expression full of intense fascination. As the manager of the forest, maybe she was naturally drawn to gardens, a place of harmony between people and nature.

Birds could be heard hooting in the dark forest.

It seemed that before I knew it, desert owls had made Shirley’s forest their habitat. It was hard to believe a deadly battle had taken place here not too long

ago.

The crackling fire was the only source of light in this forest. The dull pocket of light felt like it was somehow disconnected from the rest of our environment. I could hear the gentle sound of the flowing river, and a harmonica probably would have added to the mood, if I knew how to play one.

I placed a blanket on the ground and laid on it. I had reunited with old friends again, but unfortunately, it was time for me to wake up. Marie laid down using my arm as a pillow, and she stuck her knee between my legs as usual.

She let out a cute yawn, then nuzzled her sleepy face against me. Our stomachs touched, and I felt her warmth that was characteristic of when she was feeling sleepy. I felt as if I could fall asleep comfortably like this even without a blanket.

“Nnh, I’m sleepy... I’ll look forward to... the farm tomorrow...”

So, she remembered. I chuckled, and Marie’s eyelids grew heavier and heavier. I had learned recently that there was a time when Marie disliked sleeping. That was pretty hard to believe now.

I felt a presence behind me after a delay, and Wridra put her arms around me without modesty. I had gotten used to being in such close proximity with her, despite her fine features and lovely, long black hair.

“Hmm, my heart races at the thought of being back in Japan after all this time.”

“Oh? But you’re always there as the black cat. I guess it’s different when you’re there in the flesh.” I turned around slowly, and Wridra was watching me with her elbow on the ground and her head resting in her hand. I saw her almond-shaped eyes blink in the firelight, then narrow into a smile.

“Yes, of course. It has been quite stressful being unable to chide you two. Hah, hah, I could throw water on you now that I have my body.”

All I could do was ask her to take it easy on me. I did realize that I shouldn’t turn around to look at her too much. Maybe it had to do with her being an Arkdragon, but she had never made a habit out of wearing clothes to bed. Feeling those mounds of a woman and mother against my back, I felt a small

urge to take back my thoughts from earlier. It seemed it would take a lot more time before I got used to this.

By the time I put the blanket over us and the fire grew smaller, I felt myself getting sleepy, too. The senses in my extremities felt dull, and my eyelids grew heavier from the quiet breathing coming from behind and in front of me. When I looked up at the night sky, a semi-transparent woman floated above me instead of the stars.

“Hey there, Shirley. Sorry we couldn’t stay long today.” She shook her head. The somewhat puzzled expression on her face could have been due to our sleeping configuration. After all, the three of us slept with our bodies touching so we could all go to Japan together.

I couldn’t touch her in my corporeal form. But as her finger tickled my hair, it almost felt as if she was patting my head. There was a faint warmth and ticklish sensation there. Feeling as if I could sleep more comfortably than usual, I whispered to her before falling asleep.

“Good night, Shirley.”

Her lips moved to mouth back “Good night,” and my consciousness faded away.

Now, I hadn’t noticed that Shirley had positioned herself in such a way so my head was practically on her lap. The three of us began to fade away from existence, and her eyes widened at the sight of our outlines growing faint.

Maybe it was because we mentioned the Japanese garden earlier.

Shirley looked around for some reason, and then, as if she had given in to her curiosity, she wrapped her arms around my body and leaned onto it as she closed her eyes. We all vanished into thin air... and no one was left in the forest.

An owl hooted again in the forest where no one was present.

§

How odd...

It was a nice, refreshing morning, but my body felt heavy. Not to mention, I felt a bit of a chill, and I could see an elf and a black-haired beauty looking at me

worriedly. Actually, Wridra didn't really look worried.

Marie placed her hand against my forehead, which felt nice and cool against my skin.

"You don't have much of a fever, but you don't look so good. Maybe you caught a cold?"

"Hm, how interesting. Not to worry, companies have such a thing as pee-tee-oh for times like these."

I was surprised Wridra knew about PTO. Luckily, my throat and nose were fine, but it seemed like it would've been a good idea to call in today. If my symptoms were really bad, it would have been best to go to the hospital.

"Hm... I guess I should. But I don't recall ever catching a cold while I'm sleeping..."

With that, I rose to a sitting position. We were in my condo in Koto Ward, and the sun was shining brightly through the curtains.

People said summer colds were rough, so I wished I hadn't caught one. One thing that caught my attention was the strange thumping sound around my chest. It sounded different from my own heartbeat. Maybe I was just imagining it...

I got up from bed and started slowly making my way toward the bathroom.

My head was in a bit of a daze. I didn't even notice the finger touching my shoulder.

Chapter of Midsummer, Episode 5: Welcome to Japan, Ms. Floor Master

I stretched as I continued walking. It was a rather languid stretch, as my body definitely felt heavy.

“Hm... I think I’ll take the day off after all. But I feel like people won’t like it if I take a sick day on a Monday. They’ll probably assume I slept in after partying too hard on the weekend or something.”

I always worried about such things due to being so adjusted to working in a company. That was why I avoided calling in right after days off, and I hardly ever used my paid time off. This meant I wouldn’t get any dirty looks from superiors, but I couldn’t help but worry about these little things as a working member of society.

I felt like I’d changed recently. My colleagues had been telling me that I’d been more cheerful and easier to talk to as of late. I had always worked out of necessity and for the sole purpose of simply making a living, and I wasn’t really the type to make chit-chat. But through my interactions with Marie, Wridra, and the Ichijos, it seemed I was changing little by little. That wasn’t a bad thing, though.

I didn’t have much of a fever, and I still had the documents I’d prepared while Marie was taking a bath the other night. I could get through it with enough effort, so I decided to get ready and head to work. If I still didn’t feel well later, I could take a half day off. I came to this conclusion and started washing my face.

Maybe it was because I washed off with lukewarm water, but I didn’t feel too refreshed.

Strange, because I didn’t look that sick. I stared at my face in the mirror, and that usual, sleepy-looking face stared back at me. Just behind me stood Shirley, looking right at me with a dazed expression. She was semi-transparent as usual, but had a feverish expression on her face. Our eyes met in the reflection, but

her eyes had trouble focusing.

Come to think of it, I was a twenty-five-year-old adult here in Japan. From her point of view, I must have looked like I'd suddenly aged ten years. I did speak in a calm, mature manner in the other world too, and this was her first time... seeing me... like...

"Hmmm?!"

Wait a minute.

Wait just a minute. I need to calm down first.

The toothbrush and sink were in front of me, meaning I was in my condo in Japan. That part was for sure. But it seemed it was also true that the ghostly woman was in my home with me.

"Huh? Wha...? What's going on?"

Seeing my confusion, the woman tilted her head in the mirror. She was holding on to my shoulders with her fingers, her mouth hidden behind me as she stared. But it couldn't be... This was impossible. I felt my vision blur.

Yes, she was definitely a ghost. And there she was, in my room.

I wondered what people who didn't believe in ghosts would think. I felt as if Santa had suddenly showed up and said "Good morning."

Calm down. Breathe, Kazuhiho. Just try to figure out why Shirley is here.

I held my head in my hands, then suddenly remembered something. As I was falling asleep in the dream world, I lost consciousness with my head on her lap.

"Did you follow me here when I fell asleep?"

Shirley nodded hesitantly. I slowly turned around to find her sky blue eyes waiting for me, and she blinked like some sort of small animal. Maybe she felt like she'd done something wrong, because the ends of her eyebrows drooped further and further into a sad expression.

"Oh, um, it's my fault for not warning you. It was just so comforting being around you is all."

I wasn't just saying that to make her feel better. My ability to travel between

Japan and the dream world was supposed to be a secret, but I had completely let my guard down in front of Shirley. We had spent time together as friends, so I didn't expect her to go around telling people about my ability, but I was still far too careless.

Shirley let out a sigh of relief, and I decided something. I would take the day off from work after all.

My body had felt so heavy earlier because I was haunted by Shirley, not because I caught a cold. I wished I was wrong, but that was probably it. If I showed up at work like this, it would only cause a lot of chaos. In that case, I had no choice. I decided to use some of the PTO I had accrued over time. I had to explain things to Marie and Wridra first, but... judging by how Wridra was acting earlier, she must have known already.

I wiped my face with a towel and headed toward the living room.

"Yes, I'm very sorry. I'm not feeling well today... Yes, yes..." I bowed my head deeply, then hung up the phone. Luckily, I didn't have any urgent matters to attend to, so the chief director approved my time off without issues. I sounded pretty down on the phone, so he probably believed me. He said it was fine as long as I turned in the documents tomorrow, so that was a relief.

I turned around, and Marie was brimming with excitement, while Wridra was still laying in bed. Then, I looked around the room, but Shirley was still floating around on my back.

Marie seemed to realize what was happening, and she tentatively opened her mouth to speak.

"So, is it okay for you to take the day off from work?"

"It's not great, but I don't have much of a choice for today. I can't cause a paranormal phenomenon at the workplace. Well, we have the day off, so let's celebrate with a meal, everyone."

With that, I beckoned them all over to the table. I still had leftover vegetable tempura from last night, so I added some tempura bowl style flavoring and placed the ingredients on plates. I then added some onsen-tamago, or soft-boiled eggs with the whites half done, along with some dried seaweed and miso

soup.

Marie let out a happy cheer and stood up, then walked over with light steps and hugged me around the chest. Her body felt warm against me, and her purple eyes looked at Shirley behind my back.

“Welcome to our room, Shirley. Today will be a nice day thanks to you.”

Shirley glanced up at the ceiling, looking puzzled, then smiled gently. She may not have understood what the words meant, but she seemed to be enjoying Marie’s air of excitement. I was glad Marie seemed to be happy about my day off, too.

I pulled out some chairs, and everyone took a seat. Wridra stared at me as she also sat down.

“You should know that you would be considered haunted in this current state. It won’t do you much harm, but your vitality will be drained quicker than usual, so be sure to get nutrition often.”

“Huh, I didn’t know that. But I’ve never been haunted before, so I don’t really get it.” Though, there were some things that I came to realize through experience. I got tired more easily like Wridra said, my body felt heavier, and also...

We said our pre-meal greeting, then I ate my vegetable tempura flavored with sweet sauce. Then, I noticed the flavor was surprisingly plain.

“Huh, there’s not a lot of flavor. Did I screw up?”

“Really? I think it’s just right. It’s very tasty,” Marie replied. She proceeded to chew with her cheeks full of food, seemingly satisfied with the meal. The mixture of mirin, soy sauce, and sugar enhanced the taste of the breading, and the others ate their meal with gusto.

“Mmf, white rice is amazing!” Wridra said as she plowed through her food.

Huh, they seemed fine with it. Maybe something was wrong with my taste buds? I took another bite, then realized something. The steady rhythm felt like the heartbeat of a little bird, and a sense of elation spread through my chest.

“Hm? Don’t tell me...”

“Indeed, you are sharing your sense of taste, as well. If Shirley tastes something, it will make your sense of taste that much duller. But eating will nourish her, making your body feel less fatigued.” Wridra pointed at me with her chopsticks, disregarding proper table manners.

That made sense. It was no wonder I couldn’t taste much. Instead, I could feel Shirley thinking, “It’s delicious.” I glanced back, and she had her mouth hidden behind my shoulder, her eyes looking up at me. She looked rather apologetic, which made me wonder if she was feeling apprehensive about inconveniencing me.

“No, no, now that you’re here in Japan, I want you to enjoy it in my stead. All right, let’s keep eating, shall we?” Her expression brightened. Although she couldn’t speak my language, she was very expressive with her emotions, so it was easy to tell what she was thinking.

I could feel a sense of appreciation and joy gushing out from within me each time I took another bite, and I took care to thoroughly chew and savor each grain of rice. She seemed to love the sticky texture and sweetness as I ate.

When I took a bite of a piece of yellow tempura, her cheeks flushed in ecstasy, and the ends of her eyebrows drooped in an inverted V shape. The crispy, yet chewy texture, the subtle sweetness distinct to vegetables, and the traditional Japanese flavoring all seemed to be to her liking.

“Oh, these are called pumpkins. They’re one of the vegetables grown in Japan, and Marie and I have been talking about growing crops together.”

“Yes, that’s right. Aren’t these pumpkins sweet and tasty? We were hoping we could plant some in your forest, Shirley. Could you please let us make a farm on the second floor?”

If it worked out, she would have gotten to eat all the pumpkins and other vegetables she wanted. Maybe Shirley was picturing a bountiful harvest in her head, because a dreamy expression was clearly visible on her face. She then squeezed her hands into fists and nodded enthusiastically. Strangely, the way she got excited like a child and her cheeks turned rosy when it came to good food seemed like a universal characteristic among girls.

Now that we got our official approval from the master of the forest, Marie’s

face lit up with joy. I watched as she raised both hands in joy and let out a “Yay!” in an adorable gesture. She swung her feet in a cheery mood, then extended her palms out to me. I raised my hands to meet hers, and our hands clapped together in a double high-five.

With our meal complete, it was time for us to experiment and satisfy our curiosity.

Marie circled around me in her slippers, staring intently. It seemed rather silly of her as she observed me from various angles, but she wasn’t just fooling around.

“Wow, I can’t see Shirley at all!”

“Huh, so she can’t be seen when she completely merges with my body,” I said.

“Seems so. This must be how she got to Japan from the dream world. Thank you, Shirley. You can come out now.” Shirley popped out of my body and reappeared in the living room, and Marie poked at her curiously. Though, she couldn’t actually touch her, being a ghost and all.

In any case, we now had the option to go out, now that we knew how to hide Shirley. And so, we decided to figure out our destination. There were many forms of entertainment in Japan, but the first candidate was the Japanese garden Shirley seemed so interested in.

“Come to think of it, you two were planning on going to the garden, weren’t you? We could visit Western-style gardens, too. Would you prefer that, or a Japanese one?” I asked.

“I’ve seen those kinds of gardens on TV before. I heard spring and fall were the best seasons to visit them, so I think we missed our window.”

Shirley glanced from one speaker to the next as we conversed, excitement slowly building inside her. As someone who was so closely associated with elements of nature like trees and flowers, a garden could open up a whole new world for her. This was going to be her first time sightseeing through Japan. I had to make sure she would enjoy it to the fullest.

“Then why don’t we take the middle ground and visit a manor that’s a mix of

Japanese and Western styles?”

“An excellent idea! The Japanese certainly like to mix cultures together, it seems,” Wridra pointed out, and I couldn’t deny that. The Japanese really did tend to be big on following trends. Blending elements of Japanese and Western cultures was a common thing, and I found it interesting how it resulted in making a new sort of culture in itself. This applied to food, and modifying Western fashion to make it popular overseas was pretty much a daily occurrence.

I sipped some Japanese tea, and I felt an appreciation for its subtle, yet tasty flavor. Wridra was right; my body felt a lot lighter after having a meal. One could say I took a sick day without actually being sick, but I decided not to dwell on it too much.

“Okay, let’s change and get ready to go. Since Shirley’s here to visit, let’s take the car out so we don’t have to rush.”

“Yes, good idea. We can buy some juice at the convenience store and listen to music on the way. Hee hee, it’s not even the weekend, but this is going to be so much fun!” Marie voiced my sentiments exactly. If I could spend a lot of time playing with the girls like this, maybe it wasn’t so bad to fake being sick... No, no, I actually did feel sick earlier, so I didn’t want to consider it faking.

We began to prepare in order to enjoy our day off to the fullest. But I did wonder one thing: how was I supposed to go to the bathroom while being haunted by a ghost?

I turned the steering wheel and slowly pulled out of the parking lot.

Then, strangely, I felt a sensation of fear spreading inside of me. Of course, I was used to driving, so there was nothing scary about driving a car. This meant the emotion wasn’t my own, but instead originated from the one sharing my body. I was haunted by a cute ghost today, after all.

“There’s no need to be afraid, Shirley. This is called a car, and it’s like a horse in the other world.”

“Yes. Kazuhiro-san is mild-mannered, so he drives slowly, too. His driving is so safe that it will make you yawn. Now, which song should I play...?” Strange, I

seemed to recall Marie clinging to my arm and screaming at first. It seemed that experience had been wiped from her memory, and she focused on trying to decide which CD to play.

Once she finally made her selection, a single disc was drawn into the CD player. The clock read nine o'clock, and a clear, blue sky and the bright sun could be seen out of the window. The music playing from the speakers was from a movie I had watched with the girls before. The rhythmic drums and melodic piano made me want to tap my feet along with the song. Still, I stayed focused on driving safely.

"Oh, this is that song from that anime movie we watched before, isn't it? You like it?"

"Of course. I'm a big fan of that director. I can use magic too, but I wonder why I can't fly..." With that, Marie puffed out her cheeks and leaned back in the passenger seat. I had thought she was joking, but the way she rested her chin in her hand and looked out of the window told me she was serious. Marie could not only use sorcery, but she could control spirits too, so I found it strange that she wanted to fly so badly.

"But we've got a flying Magic Stone now," I reminded her.

"Yes, it was wonderful riding on Roon. But I'd like to fly with my own magic. I'm sure it would be so much fun to soar through the sky."

Wridra the Arkdragon sat up in the back seat and peered over at us in reaction to Marie's comment. It had been a while since she last visited, so she had been observing the scenery of Japan with great interest now that it was officially summer.

"Hah, hah, if you wish to fly, I can teach you. You simply create a multi-layered barrier to keep yourself from getting crushed under the pressure, then fly through the sky like a swift wind."

"Nooo, that's too realistic. I want something more fantasy-like." I wanted to point out that Marie was already in the realm of fantasy by nature as an elf.

The conversation was lighthearted like the music, and laughter could be heard in the car throughout the ride. It seemed Shirley was no longer afraid thanks to

the cheerful mood.

“Well, we’ve been spending our time like this in Japan for a while now, but I’m sure things will be the same in the other world, too. You’re going to have fun with us, Shirley, so you’d better be prepared,” I said. I noticed her semi-transparent hair flowing in the air, then glanced in the back mirror to find her there. She was still gently holding on to my shoulders, but her expression was quite cheery. Shirley nodded, and I took that to mean she was looking forward to it.

We continued to make our way through Kinshicho Station, then drove straight down the city streets. There were many trucks out in the middle of the weekday, and the Edo River’s levee came into sight as the group had the drinks and ice cream that were purchased at the convenience store.

Marie gestured for me to open my mouth, and the soft serve she gave me was... Nope, still couldn’t taste much. Shirley certainly seemed to enjoy the taste instead, so I was fine with that. I could feel her getting emotionally moved by how unbelievably delicious it was, and it felt like she wanted to jump around with joy, so it was actually pretty entertaining on my end.

Shirley had a habit of emerging when her emotions were heightened, and she came out with her hands trembling and lips pursed, as if she was saying “Mmm!” The other girls laughed happily at her child-like gesture.

“You know, Shirley, this is made from cow’s milk. It’s made by adding sugar and mixing it while chilling it. His grandfather actually has cows of his own,” Marie explained proudly. She was starting to become somewhat of an expert on Japan. Though, ice cream was something that had actually been brought over from the West. Shirley looked at me with admiration, but I hadn’t actually done anything. Maybe I seemed impressive by association through the order of “Ice cream is amazing,” “Cow’s milk is amazing,” “Your grandfather is great for owning cows,” and “You are amazing.” My grandfather was definitely far above me in that sense, though.

“There are animals in Shirley’s forest, too, aren’t there? Maybe we could get some milk from them?” Marie suggested.

“Hm, that forest has not been defiled at all. That may work, but the second

floor has not completely stabilized yet. We must avoid killing as much as possible.” We blinked at Wridra’s comment.

Marie turned from her passenger seat, then asked her friend and mentor, “Wait, what do you mean, ‘defiled’?”

“There is no word that means the exact same thing in your language, but it is close to what you may call ‘elemental breakdown.’ During the great war, the world constructed by magic broke down. The magic elements in the world had become far too dense. This is why the ancient constructed world was broken, and its remnants still enshroud the current world. I am certain you recall eating the horribly rancid meat and vegetables there.”

We were dumbstruck, hearing the truth of the ancient world unravel so unexpectedly. This was of great interest to me, who wanted to enjoy everything that the world had to offer, and to Marie, who wanted to learn everything there was to know about it.

Marie and I looked at each other, blinking, and then she asked the Arkdragon what was on her mind. “Wridra, could you tell us something? What happened to that world...?”

“Hm. I can, but its records are left within the ancient labyrinth, as well. It will surely be more enjoyable for you to read through the texts with your own eyes.”

We couldn’t argue with that. The ancient, sleeping labyrinth was still shrouded in mystery. Once we conquered those unknown lands, its ancient secrets would be revealed to us. We would be the only ones to know the story that no one else in that world knew about.

The ancestors of Mewi the Neko once lived in that desert oasis. How had the ancient labyrinth full of Magic Stones come to be, so far beneath the surface? And why were its gates being opened now?

When I first saw the massive hole in the ground that seemingly led into the abyss, I was sure I felt the breath of the ancients from its depths. I was dying to know the story of what had happened so long ago. The Age of Magic, and the Age of Night... I wanted to learn of the events that had taken place in history. I glanced over at Marie, and the determination was emanating from her body.

Maybe I had the same expression on my own face. She placed her small hand on me, and her skin was sweaty, perhaps from the summer humidity.

“Let’s conquer the ancient labyrinth together,” she said.

“Yeah, let’s. I was going to even before Wridra told us about this, but I’m dying to find out its secrets now.”

We clasped our hands together, and I found that her grip was surprisingly strong. But it was no wonder, considering she was a woman who had learned so much magic through independent study, and had learned under the tutelage of the Arkdragon. No partner could have been more reliable than her, and I knew that clearing the labyrinth with her was entirely possible as long as we had each other.

Meanwhile, Shirley watched us with a strangely forlorn expression on her face. She was close enough to reach us with an outstretched hand, but it was like she was in a separate, distant world.

It wasn’t until later that she would find out why.

§

I closed the car door and started walking around the parking lot with the others.

It was still early morning, but the asphalt was hot from baking in the sun, and the ultraviolet rays felt like needles against my skin. Marie walked along the road with light steps, clad in a white dress and the straw hat she had bought because it was “summery.”

“Ah, so hot! Japan’s heat is just so humid,” she said.

“Indeed. Arilai is hotter, but the dry heat does not bother me as much. Though, my body temperature as a cat was abnormally high. This is far more manageable in comparison.” Wridra was lightly dressed in just a tank top, hot pants, and boots that went up to her knees. Sweat glistened on her skin under the sunlight.

The air was thick with heat and humidity, and the cicadas singing all around us painted the very picture of summer. We all complained about the heat as we

climbed up the gently inclined slope. We were in a parking lot by the bed of the Edo River, and a path where one could walk their dog or enjoy a stroll awaited us ahead.

The trees planted all along the path provided shade on the way, and as we kept going, the serenely flowing Edo River came into view. Seeing it glimmering in the sun, Marie narrowed her purple eyes into a smile.

“Ah, a river! There’s so much greenery around here, too.” It was still as hot as ever, but it somehow felt a bit cooler with the water in front of us. Maybe Shirley wasn’t used to seeing such well-maintained land, because I could feel her heart thumping harder.

“I know it’s hot, but we’ll get to our destination if we keep walking a bit farther,” I said.

“This heat is appropriate for the summer. I quite like it. You children should go out into the sun more, rather than being cooped up in your room or underground labyrinths.”

With that, Wridra stretched out her limbs, seemingly enjoying the bright sunlight. Though, she lived underground herself, and it wasn’t very convincing when one considered how pale her skin was.

Just then, Marie returned from her look around the area and squeezed my hand as she usually did. Our fingers were slightly sweaty as they wrapped around each other, and we began walking side-by-side. Her white dress was brilliant in the sunlight, and it didn’t cover much of her pale skin. She placed a hand on her straw hat, and there was an expression of delight on her face as she looked up at me.

“So, where are we heading now?” she asked.

“Well, there are several Japanese gardens around, but we’re going to a place where we can feel the Taisho romanticism the most. It’s a building that was built during a time of this country called the Taisho period.” With that, I pointed to a sign that showed the path leading to “Yamamoto-tei.” It was a registered tangible cultural property of Katsushika Ward, and was full of the distinct air of the Taisho period. This was my first time visiting too, and I was looking forward to experiencing it with Marie and Wridra.

As we walked along the road, an old-fashioned brick wall came into view. The gentle curve outlined the exterior of the premises, emphasizing the sheer size of the Yamamoto-tei property. The singing cicadas only made the heat more noticeable at first, but the view of the building made the sound feel somewhat nostalgic.

We continued walking in silence, and then the Japanese word “semishigure,” which referred to a chorus of cicadas singing like a rainy shower, came to mind. I closed my eyes and listened to the sound of countless cicadas, and I felt the summer heat fade away from my thoughts. I mentioned it out loud since we still had time until we reached our destination. Wridra closed her eyes for a moment, then confidently turned to me as if she had it all figured out.

“Hm, I see.”

“Oh? Did you figure something out, Wridra? I still haven’t reached that point yet.” She was about the same height as me, and the entire length of her long, slender legs was plainly visible in her hot pants. The draconian had the figure of a supermodel, and my eyes were naturally drawn to her, having seen her for the first time in a while. Her straight, lustrous hair swayed as she turned her head and smiled at me alluringly.

“Indeed, this is a type of self-hypnosis. You can trick your own senses by overwriting them with a skill. Hah, hah, this is but child’s play for me.”

Yup, she was totally off the mark. I gave up on explaining and just returned her smile instead. The sense of Japanese elegance known as “wabi-sabi” was hard to describe in words, so I opted to just have them experience it in person.

We turned the corner, and Yamamoto-tei finally came into view. The entrance was as big as a storehouse, and the pine trees peeking over the walls and the various design elements certainly had a touch of Japanese beauty to it.

“Wow, the tile roof is very Japanese! Is this an aristocrat’s manor or something?”

“Something like that. These gates are designed like those of traditional samurai residences. It was made during the Taisho period, during a time of civilization and enlightenment, so there are Western architecture elements mixed in, too.”

The group collectively made an impressed noise, looking all around as we passed through the gate. The sunlight softened when we entered the shade, and I let out a sigh of relief at being out of the heat. I had visited several noble mansions in the other world, but this was my first time seeing one in Japan.

As soon as we entered, a Japanese-style garden awaited us. Pine and azaleas were planted in a slight curve, and each of them were trimmed in a cute, round shape. Beyond those was the main building, which was positively brimming with Taisei romanticism with its fusion of Japanese and Western design. The sound of cicadas felt distant as we became immersed in the atmosphere of sheer tasteful elegance, and we all raised our voices at once.

“Wow, wow, amazing! There are so many trees here, but the scenery is so peaceful!”

“Unlike Western designs, they use trees and soil as walling. I think that’s why the houses and plants blend together so naturally. Yeah, I really like this place.” I could feel my heart beating stronger even as I spoke.

Shirley was seeing the same sight as me through my body. Marie walked up to me and urged me to hurry as she tugged on my hand, and the softness of her skin made my heart soar further.

I came to realize that Shirley, who had no physical body and was bound to the second floor for so long, had never had a friend to pull her hand along like this. I could feel my senses focusing on my fingertips, and the overwhelming scent of greenery made Shirley grow even more elated.

I placed a hand on my thumping heart and thought, “I’m happy for you.”

Then, I felt as if she nodded back.

Marie, who had a good appreciation of Japanese elegance already, was full of excitement as she led us toward the main building.

Now, the building belonging to a noble house from the Taisho period was full of surprises. There was a rickshaw at the entrance, and beyond it was a tatami room with an impressive drawing featured on the folding screen.

“Ah, a picture of hanashobu! Look, Wridra, remember they were blooming all around the garden we visited?”

“Oho, this is quite well done. Such beautiful use of purple and white. It appears the Japanese favor a distinct type of brush stroke. Quite tasteful. I like it.” I had to agree with Wridra’s assessment. It didn’t have the same showiness as Western styles, but the usage of vivid colors was quite enjoyable in Japanese art. The brush strokes seemed somewhat flat at first glance, but it could be interpreted as the direction of artistic beauty that was used in art from that era.

“How do I put this...? It just hits you the same way as when you look at a real flower.”

“Maybe striking pictures like these were popular. Japan has a unique culture as an island country, and even famous painters overseas have learned from the techniques here. Though, I’m sure the other way around is way more common.” Perhaps that was why it was so interesting. If Japan had been a part of a bigger continent all this time, its culture probably would have become the same as other countries in no time.

We couldn’t see it up close because of the enclosure in the way, but I took pictures of Marie and Wridra happily striking peace signs. The shutter went off with a snap, and the combination of the traditional Japanese background, a girl that was as pretty as a fairy, and the black-haired beauty drew a lot of attention, and the other visitors were also taking pictures for some reason. It made me happy seeing them look so delighted. I wanted to take a picture of Shirley too, but it probably would have caused issues if a ghost showed up in a photo.

Marie returned with light steps and naturally wrapped her arms around mine, then looked up at me with those bright eyes.

“Say, these Japanese houses are so wonderful, but why are there so few buildings? They’re so peaceful and nice to spend time in. It’s a shame, really.”

“Because of the spread of Western architecture, and because they started designing the buildings so they can fit more people on limited land. Though, there are some people who rebuild old houses and live in those.” There were times when people came here from overseas, realized the draw of Japan, and ended up living here, too. I explained this to Marie, but she made a face as if she didn’t really understand.

I figured it would be easier to just go inside and have her experience it rather than explain with words. And so, we decided to go inside the building together. But we all reeled back when we saw the price of entry at the reception desk.

“No way! 100 yen?!”

“How lax. Much like Kazuhiro’s sleepy face,” Wridra said.

Wait... does that mean my face is only worth about 100 yen? I could feel Shirley giggling inside me, but I pointed at the menu without being deterred.

“Let’s have some tea while we look at the garden. Can you all pick out some snacks and something to drink?” I’d heard that women loved sweets, and it seemed there was some truth to that. Wridra and Marie immediately moved their faces closer to the menu to figure out which one they wanted. Yup, it seemed my girlfriend had completely forgotten about her diet.

Marie tugged on my hand and pointed at a picture of matcha.

“Hey, what is this green thing? The color is so pretty.”

“Ah, that’s matcha tea. It has a natural sweetness and a distinct, bold flavor. Since we’re here, why don’t you try it with some Japanese confectionaries?” I replied.

Marie’s eyes lit up with excitement, and she tapped the ground several times with her feet before saying, “I’ll take the matcha, please,” with a determined look on her face. The person taking the order seemed a bit surprised by the fluent Japanese coming from someone with her facial features. The aged woman blushed, but shook her head and returned to her customer service face.

“Yes, a matcha tea and confectionaries set. What would you two like to order?”

“Hm, zenzai with shiratama... Interesting. Ah, I know. Kazuhiro, how would you like to enjoy half of this dessert with me? Hah, hah, quite a brilliant idea, no?” The Arkdragon smiled cheerfully as she made her suggestion, but I could only picture her eating both of our portions completely. A bead of sweat rolled down my head. I was a bit troubled by the feeling of Shirley’s presence nodding inside me, but I thought about it for a moment and decided to take the offer. Sad to say, my reasoning for accepting it was that I figured Wridra wouldn’t do

anything too mean to our guest visiting for the first time.

“Okay, let’s do that. Then, I’ll take one more order of the matcha and confectionaries set, and a zenzai with shiratama for her.”

“Thank you. Please take a seat wherever you’d like.” The attendant had a satisfied look on her face, as if she had witnessed a treat, and guided us to a room in the back with jaunty steps. And so, we were off to a wonderful place where we could get a good view of the Taisho period garden.

As soon as we arrived at the guest room with a view of the garden, we all stood frozen in place.

The garden could be seen on the other side of the corridor through the wide-open doors, and it felt like the true essence of Japan. Before us were some azalea that had been trimmed in a round shape, some smooth, rounded rocks, and layers of greenery like pines near the water.

It was arranged so the lower plants were placed in the front, gradually sloping upward with the taller trees in the back. I could faintly see some stone lanterns, which seemed to represent the harmony between man and nature. The girls forgot to breathe as they stared in awe at the fantastical world before them.

“Ah...! Ah! The greenery is like a painting come to life! This is the very meaning of the word ‘fantastic’! Japanese gardens truly are fantastic!” Marie exclaimed.

“It is splendid, indeed. So this is the place of relaxation that brings about all harmony in the world. To think I am just now realizing this upon arriving here...” I honestly didn’t even think she was being overdramatic. I could feel the raw emotion and elation overflowing from Shirley.

I had a feeling this was the first time the ladies had seen such a harmonious arrangement of greenery. Greenery that was managed by humans usually tended to have a vague sense of loneliness to it. But there was such beauty in the view before us that we could almost feel the plants breathing. It was no wonder this architecture had been around since the Taisho period. Even an amateur like me could sense that the people from back then had a different sort of outlook on the world.

“Now, let’s take a seat and take our time enjoying the view. Oh, the tatami smells nice.” I ran my hand over the tatami mats, and they made me feel a sense of nostalgia. I crossed my legs and sat down next to the table, taking in a deep breath. The chill air flowed in through the open window. Luckily, there weren’t too many people around, and it felt as if we had gone to some rural country somewhere.

The black-haired woman sitting cross-legged in front of me had a somewhat blank look on her face as she opened her mouth to speak.

“Hm, hm, this is nice, indeed. The good thing about these places is that one can truly spread their wings in peace.”

“It’s so wonderful. I could gaze at it all day. It even made the heat slip my mind completely.” Marie had a dreamy expression on her face as she also sat down. I could understand why they were so impressed. Even I was beginning to daydream about what it would be like if I lived in a house like this. Waking up in the morning and eating breakfast with this view, which surely changed completely as the weather changed to rain, wind, or snow. Such a life was something most modern folks could only dream of.



The thumping heartbeat I was feeling didn't seem to quiet down at all. I wondered what sort of expression Shirley had, now that she realized there was a whole new world she had never known. For some reason, I was dying to see the face of the woman who managed and nurtured nature with such love.

"How strange. Zera and Puseri's manor is much more spacious, but this garden somehow feels just as abundant. In terms of atmosphere, this place feels much deeper, if that makes sense," Marie said.

"Yes, I must agree. This entire garden was prepared specifically for this resting place. The way they use the space here feels incredibly luxurious to me," Wridra replied. As they continued their conversation, something just as luxurious appeared before us. A woman dressed in a Japanese-style outfit walked down the corridor with a tray in her hand, bowed, then began handing out the tea and snacks.

The sound of the four-legged tray being placed on the table snapped the girls out of their reverie, and then they were surprised by the colorful snacks and tea placed before them. Though, the young attendant was probably just as surprised. My foreign-looking companions bowed politely and thanked her with fluent Japanese, so I couldn't blame her for staring back with her mouth agape.

"Aha ha, I'm sorry. I completely assumed you were tourists."

The young girl with her hair tied back flashed a carefree smile. She was young enough to be a student that was working part-time during summer vacation.

"Please enjoy. Feel free to call me if you need anything." She shyly hid her mouth with the tray and hurried away, and Marie and I couldn't help but laugh. Seeing such youthful energy was making me feel cheerful... Wait, I was starting to sound like an old man.

"Ah, this green is so beautiful, too. And the pink confectionaries are so cute." Marie reached for the matcha tea, which was an unusual sight for her.

Just then, I heard the sound of a wind chime from somewhere. It was somewhat reminiscent of the term "semishigure" that came to mind earlier. Before I knew it, the summer heat had become a part of the atmosphere, and it seemed to me that Marie was beginning to understand how to enjoy the

moment.

She stared at the glass in her hand. The matcha was a vivid green, and she knew it was an unfamiliar smell after the first whiff. She then placed her lips on it and took a sip. The refreshing bitterness took her by surprise, and her eyes widened at the faint sweetness that followed.

“The fragrance passes through my nose afterward... Hmm, that smells nice. It’s a mature, refined flavor. The fresh tea leaves leave a distinct aftertaste.” Marie furrowed her brows and squirmed a bit. The smooth, yet robust flavor of the tea leaves wasn’t something that could be easily replicated at home. Or maybe I just tended not to buy them, but they were normally sold in supermarkets.

“Matcha is really popular overseas, too. You might understand why when you try one of the confectionaries.” Upon hearing my advice, Marie glanced at the pink confectionary on the small plate before her. She picked up the small knife and cut the sweets into smaller bits, then ate it. The velvety sweetness hit her first, and then she took a sip of the matcha as recommended...

“Mmm, so elegant! Wait, the sweetness is melting away in the tea! Ah, such extravagance... It’s delicious. I could definitely get used to this.” Elves had a strong sense of taste and smell. She could not only enjoy the sweetness, but also the fragrance passing through her nose, giving her quite the lavish eating experience. Marie leaned on my shoulder as if she was going to melt next to me. I then whispered the words of temptation into her ear.

“It’s been popular as a dessert because of how well it goes with sweets. I know you love ice cream, Marie, but I don’t think you’ve tried it with matcha yet.”

“What? That’s a thing in Japan?! No, it can’t be. I’m sure such opulence is forbidden in ice cream. We have no choice but to buy some later so I can see for myself!” Marie’s eyes widened, and she spoke with such a flustered tone that I burst out laughing.

Her face was really close. She was adorable to boot, and she took my pinky on her own and forced me to promise her that we would indeed get some matcha ice cream later. It really wasn’t fair, and it affirmed just how cute girls could be

in my mind.

“This is dangerous. After tasting this, I’m starting to worry if I’ll still be able to enjoy tea in Arilai, which was my one and only treat there.”

“I think you should enjoy all sorts of different kinds of tea. Oh, I should try some of mine, too.” I could feel Shirley getting antsy about getting a taste, so I hurriedly picked up my own glass. I had a habit of taking things slow just so I could enjoy Marie’s reactions.

My lips pressed against the cold glass, and I took a sip of the tea. I didn’t really taste much of it, but Shirley must have liked the smooth texture and bold flavor of the tea, followed by its subdued sweetness. I couldn’t move for some time, as her emotional reaction to the delicious taste was a bit overwhelming.

The flavor of the seemingly healthy matcha tea grew even stronger after passing through one’s throat. There was even a hint of the fragrance in Marie’s breath as she exhaled, and we appreciated the moment as we took sips and breathed out in silence. I dreamily glanced outside to find the peaceful view of the Japanese garden. This really was almost too good to be true. I was feeling a bit guilty about taking a vacation, but I almost completely forgot about that guilt as I immersed myself in the view.

This was kind of nice. I felt like I was starting to develop a taste for spending time in peace and quiet like this. I always thought this was a hobby for the elderly, but I was starting to feel as if I could make this into a habit.

“Mmf, Japanese desserts are a class above the rest,” Wridra said, obviously loving the sweetness of her shiratama zenzai, a treat consisting of soup made with azuki beans with rice-flour dumplings inside. The spoon hung out of her mouth as she savored the sweetness of the azuki beans, a happy smile spreading across her face.

She often plowed through her food with vigor, but tended to take her time when it came to dessert. She squeezed her eyes shut in bliss, and furrows formed between her well-shaped eyebrows. Her lips parted, and she exhaled alluringly. There was a certain sexiness in the simplest of gestures when it came to this woman.

She slowly worked her way through her precious dessert, and then her

obsidian eyes turned toward me. The zenzai was thrust toward me, which I took to mean she wanted to trade.

I was feeling a bit self-conscious about using the spoon that was just in her mouth... Still, I could feel that Shirley was eager to try it, so I had no choice. I tentatively picked it up, then I felt a tug on my shirt. I thought I was going to get scolded, but Marie shyly placed a finger over her mouth and looked up at me.

“Say, Kazuhiro-san. Um, do you think I could get a taste of that when you’re done?”

“Sure, of course. Just give me one minute.” I scooped up some of the zenzai and put it in my mouth at once. The chewy texture and subtle sweetness was thoroughly satisfying... though, it was Shirley that got to experience it. Wridra was drinking tea and taking a bite of the sweets, completely unfazed, so it seemed there was no reason for me to be embarrassed. Well, we were close friends, after all.

“Here you go, Marie. I think this will go nicely with the tea, too.”

“Yes, thank... you...” Marie froze as she took the bowl in her hand. I stared at her, confused, then she stared at the spoon, her face gradually turning pink.

The change was quite noticeable due to her normally pale complexion. She then glanced at my face and back several times... and I had to admit, I was starting to feel conscious about it, too. *How strange*, I thought, considering we were already in a relationship and had kissed several times already.

“Hah, hah, what is the matter, Mariabelle? Your face appears to be red,” Wridra pointed out.

“I-It’s nothing...! There’s nothing unusual about this at all! Hey, if you could stop staring at me and turn away...” Well, this was embarrassing. The way her eyebrows were raised in frustration with her face bright red was almost too much. She pinched me under my armpit, and I managed to look away to get through the moment. Shirley’s heart was fluttering too, which only made things worse.

I was painfully aware of her spoon clattering awkwardly... Why were we making each other sweat like this in the middle of summer...?

I felt Wridra's foot forcefully kick my thigh under the table. *Oh, Wridra, why is your face so emotionless right now...?*

Now, it was time to move on and get back to enjoying the charm of the Taisho period. Though, to be honest, I mainly just wanted to get away from this situation.

One of the features of this building was that one could not only enjoy the Japanese garden, but also the Western architectural elements here. After seeing the essence of Japanese beauty, we walked down the corridor a bit to an orthodox Western room. I remembered that this corner had Western-style outer walls when I'd seen it from the outside. Everyone's eyes widened at the sight of the tranquil stove and patterned brown sofas around the table.

"Oh, it's such a snug little room, but it's so bright and lovely. Maybe because there are so many windows?"

"It is quite serene here. I would love to show this place to aristocrats who love wastefully spacious designs full of gaudy decorations." The mosaic floors and white lime plaster ceiling, which was quite rare for its time, had a distinct air of the Taisho period to it. The group stared, transfixed, at the room with a coziness in its design that was often favored by the Japanese. However, there was an unusual keenness in Wridra's eyes. She observed her surroundings with a discerning look, as if she was trying to memorize everything from the stained glass windows to the patterns on the walls.

Could it be that she was plotting something? Come to think of it, Wridra mentioned that she was helping around on the second floor, so maybe this was related. As I considered this thought, Marie, who was still staring at the room, turned to face me.

"Hey, don't you think it would be nice to quietly read books here? I wasn't really interested in furniture before, but I think I have a new appreciation for it now."

"Oh, right. I was thinking that it would be nice to have a sofa. If you also like them, we should visit a furniture store some time soon." A smile spread across Marie's face like a flower blooming before my eyes. She was likely able to visualize our new living space thanks to seeing the layout here in person. But

there was a limit to my bonus, so I had to consider my budget for our trip to the sea.

It just came to mind that it was Monday, so Kaoruko, the woman who lived in the same condo as me, wasn't working today. *Maybe I'll reach out to her later and talk about the trip if she's free.* Preoccupied by this thought, I had completely forgotten to ask Wridra about her strange behavior earlier.

Marie and Wridra stretched their limbs as we left.

Although they looked completely different, their demeanor and expressions were so similar that they looked like sisters to me. If this hadn't been Japan, Shirley probably would have fit right in with them, too. Seeing how an Arkdragon and elf could get along so well, a former floor master being among them wouldn't have made too much of a difference.

Having enjoyed our time at Yamamoto-tei to the fullest, we said goodbye to the young attendant from earlier and stepped outside. A bright, blue sky awaited us, and it was all the more satisfying now that the rainy season had passed. The heat had settled down a bit, and we felt a sense of refreshment that was different from what we had felt when we arrived at Yamamoto-tei.

"Ohh, that was so nice! I would love to visit more old buildings like this every once in a while," Marie said.

"Yes, I felt the very essence of elegance in this incredibly fruitful visit. But, to think the entrance fee was a mere 100 yen. I feel as if this could throw off my sense of monetary value." Cultural properties that were protected by the region did tend to be like that. I figured they were priced so low to encourage people to visit as many times as they wanted. They had done some major repairs recently, so maybe that was where they had put all of their revenue.

"All right, let's take a picture. How would you two rate Yamamoto-tei?"

"Hee hee, 100 points for 100 yen!" I didn't expect Marie to tell a dad joke like that.

There was a moment of silence. Wridra clutched her sides as she burst out laughing at the absurdity of it. Marie turned red, and I captured the moment in a photo. Even Shirley couldn't hold in her laughter, and it seemed they were all

conspiring to make me crack a huge smile.

I was glad to see that everyone seemed to be thoroughly satisfied with our little journey experiencing Japanese elegance and gardens.

§

We entered a back alley through the main street, and the heat softened slightly as we moved away from the sunlight.

There were few people walking around, perhaps because it was mid-day on a Monday, and many of the people out on the streets seemed to be the older crowd.

The woman walking directly in front of me had swaying black hair extending down to her hips, the fabric of her clothes sticking to her pale skin from the sweat. Her shoulder bones were visible, and her hot pants seemed to accentuate her long, slender legs and her rear as it bounced with each step.

“It seems the mood is beginning to change. I smell a scent that is distinct to Asia.”

“There are a lot of temples around here. I think I heard that they have history that spans back to the beginning of the Edo period,” I replied, and Wridra smiled bewitchingly. She really was a strangely youthful and attractive woman. Just watching her walk with her hands behind her back and humming cheerfully made me feel like I was lucky to be here.

Wridra was an Arkdragon: a being that was capable of controlling magic beyond human comprehension. But during our raids on the ancient labyrinth, she took on the role of a tank for our party. Well, to be more precise, she was more like Marie’s bodyguard. I couldn’t even imagine the destruction she could reign upon her opponents if she really wanted to. To be honest, I didn’t even want to picture what it would be like if a monstrous being that was over level 1,000 went on a rampage. Though, I had heard this was only one of her seven cores, so her level was greatly suppressed while she was with us in this form.

Now, Wridra was right about the mood around us beginning to change. This was my first time walking through the street of Shibamata Taishakuten in Katsushika Ward, but I could sense the distinct air of refinement even as a

Japanese person.

A stone enclosure indicating the temple's premises was to our right, and I saw someone looking around with great curiosity. It was Mariabelle, her beautiful eyes shining with wonder and her smile as adorable as a child's. She wrapped her arms around my elbow, looked at me with her amethyst eyes, and parted her full lips to speak.

"I like the simple, yet imposing presence. It's like a giant tree. They like putting flashy gold and silver ornaments in the churches in the other world, but I think this is far more elegant."

"I agree. I don't really visit churches very much, but churches seem to be really prosperous," I replied.

"That's because they exploit people for so much money. I much prefer the more tranquil alternative." I couldn't bring myself to tell her they made pretty good money in this world, too. More importantly, she pressed further for my agreement, and I couldn't help but be conscious of her slight mounds pushing against me.

"Cease your flirting and lead the way. I cannot focus with that delicious scent wafting this way from who-knows-where."

"I think you should be able to find it with your sense of smell alone, Wridra. We're almost there," I replied, but I was honestly feeling a bit anxious. The emotion wasn't actually coming from me, but from Shirley, the second floor master that was haunting my body. Her heart had been beating like an alarm bell, and I felt her sense of fear every time the temple came into view. That was why I had been trying to walk around the far edge of the street as much as possible, but...

"By the way, Wridra, do ghosts happen to be afraid of temples, by any chance?"

"Hm? Ah, you are worried about Shirley. I am not too familiar with the customs of this land, but as they say, when in Rome, do as the Romans do. Now that she has entered this land, she must follow the rules of this world. Even I cannot normally take on my dragon form."

“Normally”? Does that mean she could turn into a dragon here in Tokyo under abnormal circumstances? I didn’t really want to think about it, and there were times when I couldn’t read Wridra by means of what humans considered common sense.

In any case, it seemed Wridra was trying to tell me that Shirley was afraid of temples because she was following the rules of this world. She was a ghost, after all, and she definitely didn’t want to get sent to the afterlife.

“Oh my, that is worrying. Then maybe we should go home for the day?” Marie said.

“No, it should not affect her as long as she does not enter the premises. And although she fears it, I doubt it would truly send her to the afterlife.” I wondered what Wridra meant by that. Marie and I tilted our heads in confusion, and Wridra looked at us as if she was addressing her students. Her silky black hair danced in the wind, and she pressed a pointer finger against my chest.

“Even if her soul is put to rest here, her true self does not exist here. I suspect she would simply return to the hall in the second floor of the labyrinth, where she came from.”

“Oh, I get it. Hmm, does that mean Shirley can’t die, kind of like me while I’m in the dream world?” I could sense the bewilderment emanating from Shirley. I couldn’t see her visibly while haunted by her, but she was probably staring at me wide-eyed with those sky blue eyes. I could visualize her blank, innocent-looking expression, and I felt the tension being released from my shoulders. She may not have looked it, but she was once the terrifying floor master of the second floor, and I couldn’t help but think of the chaos that would ensue if she were to unleash her full power in Japan. But there was no sense in thinking about this too deeply, and we weren’t even heading to the temple in the first place.

“Oh, there it is. I heard it was within walking distance from Yamamoto-tei, but it really is close.”

We arrived at the entrance of Shibamata Taishakuten, and there was a lively shopping district before us. The stores had an old-fashioned style to them, as if

they were part of a movie set, and I could hear a surprised “Ah!” and “Oh!” coming from the others. We had just experienced the wonder of the Taisho period, but it was time for us to see the shopping district that had a history spanning back to the start of the Showa period next. Remnants of old Japan could still be seen in the approach, giving a retro vibe that provided a contrast to the visiting tourists.

The young elf and black-haired beauty blinked their eyes.

“Ah! Such an elegant shopping district! Oh, that appetizing aroma... Yes, yes, you have guided us to a good place, indeed! I commend you, Kitase!”

Wridra must have *really* liked the shopping district, considering the fact that she pulled me in for an embrace and patted my head, to my surprise. But her breasts were pressing right up against me, so I needed her to pull away for my own good.

“Oh, oh, I love that sour-sweet scent!” Wridra exclaimed.

“They must be making some senbei rice crackers. This is my first time here too, but it’s so lively with all the food vendors everywhere. It’s right about time for lunch, so I thought it would be nice to stop by here.” I glanced at the clock, and it was a little past the time we usually would have eaten lunch. It seemed we’d lost track of time while we took our time sightseeing. Nobody opposed my suggestion, of course. In fact, they turned to me full of eagerness for the upcoming meal.

“Now, can you two decide where we should eat?” I asked, and they cheerfully shouted, “Yeah!” in unison with raised fists. Marie and Wridra were always so fun and energetic together, and it made me feel more joyful just watching them.

And so, we looked around the quaint vendors as we weaved our way through the crowds of visitors. From kuzumochi, to dango, to Western-style dorayaki, all sorts of attractive shops enticed the girls who had just learned of the subtle yet delicious taste of Japanese confectionaries.

Marie tugged on my arm, and I was brought before a long-established dango shop. The aroma of mochi rice being cooked on metal plates, which were specifically designed for these Japanese dumplings, seemed to have drawn in

the elf girl's keen sense of smell. A wrinkled old man awaited us, and he smiled widely upon our arrival.

"Hey there, why don't ya try some of these with that adorable foreign lady at that table over there?"

I had to admit, I had some apprehension about eating sweets before lunch. Right as I was about to discuss what the ladies wanted to do... I noticed they were walking over to the old man as if they were hypnotized. We had only taken a few steps into the shopping district, and they had already given in to temptation.

Left with no choice, I snuck up behind Marie and whispered to her.

"You might get kind of full if you eat sweets before lunch, don't you think?"

"Urgh, I can't have that. But it smells so good... Maybe just a little?" She squeezed my shirt and looked up at me sadly. With those pleading, teary eyes directed right at me, I couldn't help but feel a strong urge to give her what she wanted. Not only that, but I could feel Shirley's mental pleading too, and it was like I was watching a puppy making sad, whining noises. It was too cute to handle. I almost felt like curling up in a ball right then and there.

"Yes, I will order some dango. Which one tastes the best?" Wridra said.

"Hey, wait! I want some, too!"

I couldn't help but exclaim, "What?!" at Wridra's sudden and casual betrayal. Not only that, but Marie immediately moved away from me to get her share, which left me feeling incredibly sad.

"Our mugwort-flavored ones are really good. Don't worry. As you can see, there are dango shops all over this place, so they're small, which lets you walk around and try a bunch of different kinds." The old man smiled kindly, and I reluctantly opened my wallet.

I had no choice this time. But considering that we were about to have lunch... No, Wridra's stomach was virtually limitless, so I just had to make sure to stop Marie from getting sucked into her pace.

I silently set my resolve not to lose on every one of these exchanges. It

seemed the path to our lunch would be a long and treacherous one.

I had found that just watching the girls happily chew dango was rather entertaining. We sat in a shaded area in long chairs near the dango shop, Marie and Wridra's cheeks full of the mugwort-flavored Japanese dumplings.

Maybe this feeling of appreciation I felt was thanks to the shopping district itself. The muted stone pavement, the old-fashioned signs written in kanji, and the rows of lively vendors... Beyond it all was the two-story Shibamata Taishakuten in all its glory.

"Mm, how fantastic. All they did was put some wood together, but it ended up with such a dignified appearance... It is quite attractive, indeed." Wridra observed the view as she pulled her last piece of dango from its skewer.

Many sightseers walked in front of us, but the Japanese proverb "dango over flowers" came to mind as Marie continued to enjoy the sweet taste of her treat with a wide smile on her face.

"Mm, delicious! What do you think this refreshing flavor is?"

"That's probably the yomogi, or Japanese mugwort. They do call them mugwort dango, after all." Marie chewed the squishy dango with red bean paste and smiled blissfully. But Shirley was urging me to hurry and eat my own, so I decided to dig into the mugwort dango myself.

I noticed a looming shadow, and I looked over to find the old man from the stall smiling at us. It seemed there weren't as many customers around during this time of day.

"How about this heat, huh? Here's some complimentary drinks for you folks. Cool off here for as long as ya want."

"Oh, thank you!" Ice clinked in glass cups as they were filled with green tea. The residents of the dream world seemed to have gotten used to Japanese tea by now. Marie placed her straw hat beside her and gladly accepted a glass.

"Sir, these dango are delicious."

"Aha ha, you're making me blush here. And the other young lady over there, drink some of this and take your time enjoying the food. I have plenty more if

you want seconds.” Wridra’s black hair swayed as she smiled in response to the old man’s invitation. Maybe she herself knew that she was prettier when she didn’t say anything. She folded her freely exposed legs and accepted her glass with a bewitching smile, and the old man’s wrinkled face turned pink. He laughed off his embarrassment and wiped his face with a towel as he returned to his stall.

“Hah, hah, ‘young lady,’ he says. It does indeed make me feel as if I am young again.” Wridra was clearly in a good mood, smiling widely as she put her lips to her glass. Ice clinked in her glass as the refreshing green tea passed through her throat. She looked up to find the vast expanse of the summery blue sky above. The wind had picked up somewhat, which helped chill the heat from her body. Her eyes narrowed happily, which reminded me of a certain black cat that was always around.

Wridra turned around with a cool expression.

“Hm. I feel as if I finally understand summer in Japan.”

“Me too! It’s peaceful, but there’s a certain charm to it. Even the heat feels like part of the fun.”

It seemed Shirley was having fun just watching these two getting so excited, because I could feel her joy as her host.

But I did wonder about one thing. We had spent the whole day together so far, but I felt something reminiscent of a slight sense of loneliness from her. It was akin to someone crying quietly, like a lost child that was being left behind.

It’s okay.

I rubbed my own arm and expressed the simple words to her. *Don’t worry.* I wanted her to know that there was nothing to be afraid of. Maybe because I was her host... No, this was something that only I understood.

“Because I’m just like you.” I uttered the words quietly enough so no one could hear. An emotion of surprise radiated from the depths of my body, like the sound of a ringing bell.

Shirley had been bound to the second floor, all alone for a long, long time. There was only one thing she could be afraid of now: the fear of being alone

again. Even more so when one considered the fact that she was immortal.

That's why I can somewhat understand how you feel. When I was a child, I was all alone in a place where no one else was around. With no one to talk to, the fences looked like a jail cell in my eyes. I remembered my breath was pure white as I exhaled, and I was constantly rubbing my hands together so they wouldn't go numb. Knowing what it felt like to be alone for so long, I truly feared my current lifestyle vanishing someday. I've always thought, "What if I go back to how things were back then?"

That was why I wanted to tell her again, "It's okay."

I would never just disappear, and the young woman smiling and asking, "Isn't it delicious?" was incredibly kind. Wridra, who sat just past her, was actually very caring, and she often fussed over us to make sure we were okay. *And we'll be growing crops together soon, right?*

Her heart beat once in response, and I thought I heard her quietly say, "Yes." The heartbeat steadily increased in pace, an emotion other than the fear I felt earlier taking over. It was as if she was excitedly waiting for the day of a school trip, and I could visualize her covering her lips to hide her quickening breaths.

Unfortunately, that was all I could tell her for now. One day, I wanted to help her so she could feel truly relieved from the bottom of her heart. But for now, she would have to take her time and enjoy the moments we had now. And so, I took a bite of the last piece of mugwort dango. The dango topped with red bean paste was so soft that it stretched as my teeth sank in and pulled.

All I could enjoy was the texture as I chewed and it brushed against my tongue. I couldn't sense its flavor or smell with Shirley haunting me, but that wasn't so bad, knowing that she was having fun.

We all moved in closer to each other.

Wridra demanded I get even closer and pulled me in by the waist, and I nearly stumbled over.

"Feeling shy, are you? How adorable," she said, and I grew even more flustered with her face so close to mine. I mean, I was a man, after all.

The old man holding up the camera smiled warmly as he watched us.

“Okay, say cheese!” he said. I put up a peace sign awkwardly, and I heard the sound of the shutter snapping. Wridra, who was standing in the center like the main character of some story, stomped over to the old man with her grip still on my waist. She flipped over the smartphone to find our commemorative picture there, and the Arkdragon stared into the screen.

“Kitase, are you closing your eyes here? You look as if you are about to vanish like a ghost.”

“No, they’re open. That’s just how my face looks.”

I almost wanted to cry. This was the cruel reality of photos. I was forced to face the dramatic difference between me and the beautiful ladies I was with. Yes, I had become painfully aware of the fact that, while there was light in this world, there was also darkness to match. Suddenly, Wridra seemed to notice something and began swiping through other pictures, pausing a moment before speaking.

“Perhaps this is my imagination, but it seems to me that the effort you put into these photos vary quite a bit. Only half of me appears in these pictures. Look, you can only see my peace sign in this one,” she pointed out.

“Hm? Yeah, that happens sometimes. Probably because I’m not too used to taking pictures yet. It was just recently that I started going on trips and sightseeing.” I laughed as I replied, but the look in Wridra’s eyes grew sharper. I could tell she didn’t trust my words at all, and she reminded me of a cat intimidating its opponent, which was scaring me a bit.

“Oho, then I do wonder why all of Marie’s pictures are taken so perfectly! This is quite the conundrum, just as much as your sleepy-looking face! This one of me as the black cat is especially terrible. The picture is not even in focus! It is blurrier than your face! Look!”

“That can’t... You’re right. I wonder why it looks so bad...” Realization hit me as I replied, and Wridra stared at me as if she didn’t believe me in the slightest. Yeah, if a monster could turn into a pair of glaring eyes, hers were probably what it would have looked like.

“Y-You... Do you not think this favoritism is far too much? Seeing how blatant it is, I actually worry for your future. Do you truly understand what is going on

here?” Wridra’s shoulders trembled as spoke. But I really didn’t have any ill intentions, so I had no idea what to say.

Wridra was overreacting. I just wasn’t good at taking pictures. I turned around to seek Marie’s support, but she was covering her face with both hands, and I couldn’t even see her expression. As I wondered what was wrong with her, I heard the old man’s laughter nearby.

“You ladies certainly are full of life. I’m glad to see you all seem to be having fun sightseeing.” He laughed kindly, and I bowed my head in a hurry. I apologized for being so noisy, but he patted my shoulder, completely unconcerned.

“Young man, it’s hot today, so be sure to stay hydrated.”

“The food was delicious. Thank you.”

“Yes, come back again!” We waved goodbye at the old man and finally resumed our walk through the shopping district. And yet, I couldn’t turn around because I could still feel Wridra glaring at me.

Well, we had come to get breakfast, and we’d lost to the temptation of dango right off the bat. As this thought came to mind, I heard something that I couldn’t believe.

“Hmm, which treat to enjoy next...?”

What...?!

I was shocked by the words that came out of Wridra’s mouth. I could tell she wasn’t joking around as she glanced around her surroundings, her black hair swaying. She was being serious. She had seriously forgotten about finding a place to eat lunch. It was rare for me to lose my composure, but my voice was trembling slightly as I spoke.

“Wridra? You haven’t forgotten about our mission of picking a place to eat by any chance, have you?”

“Hm? No, of course I have not. I am the great Arkdragon, after all. However... hm, I smell something sweet...” She sniffed around with her finely-shaped nose, but we had only walked a few meters from the last stall... Even the old man

from earlier was looking at us strangely.

Oh, I know. Marie should back me up here.

Her stomach capacity was different from Wridra, and she surely would have wanted to avoid getting too full to eat lunch. Considering how intelligent she was, she would surely understand.

I turned to Marie, full of hope, then found myself at a loss for words when I found her staring passionately at a souvenir shop. I followed her gaze to rows of indigo-dyed pieces of cloth that seemed to feature family crests from all around Japan.

“Say, what are those old-fashioned symbols?”

“Come on, Marie. Wridra is walking off by herself,” I said to her in a fluster as I started to lose the black-haired beauty in the crowd. It seemed Shirley was the only one on my side here, because I could feel a similar panic from her. Though, she was haunting my body, so she was completely powerless as an ally.

Then, I finally remembered. Wridra was wandering off on her own, but she didn’t have a wallet. That meant she would have to come back even if I didn’t chase after her, and we wouldn’t have to eat any sweets. With that in mind, I decided to answer Marie’s question.

“That’s a family crest. They’re like emblems that represent your bloodline or household. There are some drawn on those flags over there, too.” Marie’s eyes brightened at my response.

Apparently, family crests were an extremely attractive concept for residents of the fantasy world. They featured geometrical designs with flowers, plants, and even dango as motifs. Marie was completely enamored by how charming they were.

While I was giving my explanation, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned around to find Wridra had reappeared, but my eyes bulged when I noticed what she was holding.

What, dorayaki?! How’d she get that without money?

“I was staring for some time, and then I received it for free. Here, we shall

divide it among us.”

“Oh, it’s browned so nicely! Mm, such a gentle, inviting smell!”

Wait, don’t tell me she...

I turned to the stall Wridra was pointing at, and I was surprised again to find a worker standing there with hearts in his eyes. Boy, beautiful women had it good. If I did the same thing, I probably would have been treated like a nuisance and shooed away.

As I watched the other two eat, I felt a cold sweat run down my back. I was starting to worry about Marie’s stomach.

How’d this happen? I thought we were just talking about dieting not too long ago...

Then, the very thing I was worried about came true.

It was impossible for the girls to endure in the middle of a shopping district full of tempting aromas. Cream-filled dorayaki, sweet potatoes, and roasted potato yokan... Dango in particular had all sorts of flavors, like sesame and mitarashi, so it was brutal how much one could eat without getting bored. Marie’s stomach grew completely full as she continued munching on food throughout our walk around the shopping district.

Then, she found it. It was a traditional tempura restaurant that smelled of freshly fried batter and had a Showa style appearance. Passersby even stopped in the streets to turn around as they noticed the inviting smell of sesame oil. Marie stood in the middle of the crowd at a loss for words.

The dango skewer she had been holding fell to the floor.

“Ah...” Judging by the look on her face, it seemed she just remembered our mission to find a place to eat lunch. She rubbed her stomach, then slowly turned toward me. Tears welled up in her eyes, and she looked to be on the verge of crying, but the sauce on her lips made her look even sadder.

“A-Ahh...”

“Hold it together, Marie. You shouldn’t force yourself to eat if you’re full.” I wiped her lip with a handkerchief, and she wrapped her arms around me.

Normally, I would have been flustered about the soft sensation of her lips, but all I could say in this case was “What did I tell you?”

Marie trembled in frustration, her voice breaking with emotion.

“What a terrible trick devised against me... I love tempura so much! The shrimp looks so delicious, but I’m so full that my stomach could burst! Ah, I’m so sad that I could cry!” I rubbed her back consolingly, but it was kind of a surreal moment with the noise of tempura frying in the background. The worker at the restaurant was watching us with a confused look, too.

I continued patting Marie’s back, then noticed Wridra trying to get my attention.

“I can still eat plenty,” she gestured, but all I could do was shake my head no. Wridra looked shocked, but we had failed our mission, so there would obviously be no reward.

But I would have felt bad if it just ended on such a sad note. We had gone out of our way to enjoy the sights of Japan, and Shirley had been holding back this whole time.

“Why don’t we have tempura bowls for dinner, then? It might not be as good as the kind served here, but would you be okay with that, Marie?” I whispered it into her ear, and she immediately straightened up.

Her colorful, purple eyes were wide with happiness, and she threw her arms around my neck lovingly. She rubbed her soft cheek against me, then whispered, “That’s why I like you,” and I felt my temperature rise a bit. Though, it was hard to tell whether it was me she really liked, or the tempura bowls.

“Look, there are desserts made with crushed ice over there. It appears to be called, ‘shaved ice.’”

“So that’s what you want for dinner, right, Wridra?” I asked with a smile on my face, and she vigorously shook her head from side to side.

In any case...

Ah... she couldn’t resist sweets after all...

Such were my thoughts as I led Marie by the hand and we made our way back

home.

Chapter of Midsummer, Episode 6: Scattering Seeds in the Land

I turned on the engine and gripped the handle, and then I was off, driving with safety first in mind as usual. Nothing good came from rushing, and if I ended up getting into an accident, I would've been known as "the guy who ditched work and got in a car crash."

And so, my speedometer didn't budge from its steady pace even through the cheerful music playing in my car and Marie's happy humming.

But one thing that caught my attention was that Wridra, who could just produce whatever she wanted, had installed something like curtains in the back seat. Curious, I glanced back through my rear view mirror, and then I heard Marie's voice from the back seat, rather than the usual passenger side.

"Mmm, shaved ice is so crisp and yummy! Would you like some too, Shirley?"

The semi-transparent woman nodded in response, then eagerly waited with her hands squeezed at her sides.

"Say 'ahh,'" Marie said in a sweet voice, but then the strawberry-flavored shaved ice was put into my mouth rather than Shirley's. Of course, all I could feel was the flavorless and odorless coldness. But Shirley closed her eyes with joy, fully enjoying the cold and crunchy texture and strawberry flavor that kids loved.

How strange.

Shirley held me by the shoulders, but it seemed my sense of taste was somewhat transferred to her through this connection.

"Hmhm, shaved ice is the perfect dessert for the summer. There must not be a single soul in Japan who does not know of this bliss." Well, it didn't smell or taste like anything to me, so I couldn't feel this bliss she was talking about. We had just turned down the shaved ice earlier, but I reconsidered and thought it would be better to rehydrate after walking around under the blazing heat, and I

ended up buying just one. It consisted mostly of water, so it probably wouldn't have been too filling before dinner.

Marie had moved to the back seat and left her straw hat in the passenger seat before I knew it, leaving me feeling rather lonely. So, even though it didn't smell or taste like anything, it made me happy when her head popped up beside me and she asked me to eat from the spoon.

Marie then looked around the car's interior.

"You know, it really looks like a room in here just by adding some lacy curtains."

"Hah, hah, it is not that I added it for fashion. Shirley will be able to relax this way. We cannot be seen from the outside, after all."

So, Wridra had put up some special curtains so we could spend time with Shirley in her ghost form. It seemed it was tiring for her to be in hiding all the time. When Shirley had popped out inside the car earlier, she had stretched her limbs as if it was the best feeling in the world. As usual, our futuristic cat robo—I mean, Arkdragon Wridra was very impressive. I swallowed my mouthful of shaved ice, and Shirley and I got brain freeze at the same time.

Our trip was only an hour's ride away, but everyone came back looking much more cheerful. I had picked a Japanese-style garden since it was Shirley's first visit to Japan, but I was glad Marie and Wridra had fun, too.

"Oh, right. We need to make plans for our beach trip. It's Monday, so I think Kaoruko has the day off," I said.

"Oh, we're going to discuss the destination of our trip? Good idea! If she's free, we should all have dinner together again. I'm sure she would be delighted if you told her we were having tempura bowls," Marie replied. I was relieved to see her smiling beside me. After all, Marie was once famous for hating humans, and she was the only elf in Japan, to boot. I was secretly thrilled by the fact that she enjoyed interacting with neighbors now.

Anyway, we would discuss our vacation later, but that left just one problem.

I didn't expect it to be an issue earlier, but things had changed since around the time we ate the shaved ice. Put simply, my bladder was demanding I head

to the bathroom. Even so, I didn't want to trouble Shirley, and I couldn't just have her wait outside at a convenience store bathroom. It would have been a huge problem if someone saw her.

The other method I thought of was to take a nap and go to the bathroom in my dream. But I wasn't confident that I could fall asleep with a full bladder. I was in a bit of a bind.

Setting that aside, I found the relationship between Shirley and I quite strange. I was currently hosting her in my body, and my nutrients and sense of taste were being transferred to her. I had to keep this up, or she would have drained too much of my energy, and I would suffer intense fatigue like I had this morning.

"Wridra, how many nutrients do you think Shirley needs to stabilize? It'd be helpful if I could get a general idea."

"All I can say is that it varies depending on the individual. I am certain you will figure it out after going through some pain a few times. You simply need to get accustomed to it."

Well, that certainly didn't put my mind at ease. Though, I found it curious that she phrased it that way. How exactly did it vary by the individual? I tried asking her this very question, and her obsidian eyes turned to me.

"I believe that the strain on one's body strengthens when there is a gap between the ethereal entity and its host. I suppose you can call it spiritual stress. Anyone would tire if they are in the presence of someone they despise. Fortunately for you, it appears she likes you, so there is no need to worry about such a gap." Shirley looked surprised, then started waving both hands in the rear view mirror as if to deny it. I almost burst out laughing at her adorable, childlike gesture.

Wait, did she just release both hands? I had completely thought she was holding on to my shoulders while haunting me.

Then, I noticed Marie was shooting her a suspicious look, and Shirley's semi-transparent shoulders twitched in surprise. She turned around nervously, then began waving her hands at Marie this time, as if to explain herself. Wridra saw this and began laughing out loud.

“Kaha! Ha ha ha! The floor master is bowing to an elf! Look, Kitase, stop the car now and take a photo of this paranormal phenomenon. I will not allow you to miss such an opportunity this time.”

“...!” It was unusual for the mild-mannered Shirley to scowl with her brows furrowed like that. There was something particularly intense about quiet girls when they got upset. She then released her fingers from me in full and moved over to overlap onto Wridra.

“Why you—! Stop that at once! All those nutrients I consumed... Aha ha! That tickles!”

I just realized that this was my chance. Now that Shirley had left my body, I decided to use this opportunity to use the bathroom. I switched on my blinkers and turned toward the car toward a nearby convenience store.

“See you, Wridra. Be back in a bit.”

“What? I demand you get back here! No, Marie, do not go with him!”

“Oh, but you ate so much earlier, so I’m sure you’ll be fine. I envy you, being able to go on a diet so easily. Well, I’ll see you later.” Marie smiled and closed the door. We both stepped out under the blazing sun, and then realization hit us and we met eyes.

“Ah... diet...”

“This diet thing has been troubling me, but I just may be able to pull it off. Plus, your bathroom issue was resolved now. I knew you were fidgety, so I’m sorry for making you eat that shaved ice. It must have been rough.”

“No, not at all. But I’ll be walking at a faster pace than usual, so try to keep up,” I replied. Marie rubbed my back and giggled. The sun felt bright in my eyes.

I walked on with Marie’s hand in mine. It was a bit cold from the shaved ice she was eating earlier, and her finger unconsciously rubbed my hand. It felt good and slightly ticklish at the same time, and she glanced up at me with her pale purple eyes.

“Oh, we should take a picture of Wridra being haunted while we can. We may be able to hold it over her somehow.”

“Ha ha, you’re a devious one, Marie.”

“Oh, no, you’re secretly the wicked one. No one seems to notice, but I know. I’ll let you off lightly if you admit it now.” With that, she bumped her butt into me from my side. I walked through the convenience store’s automatic doors feeling more cheerful than usual for some reason.

As for Wridra, she was surprisingly chipper and struck a pose with a peace sign in the picture we took of her.

§

I placed the bags of groceries on the ground next to the entrance. I then reached out to Marie, and even though we had just finished grocery shopping, there was still something we had to do before making dinner.

“It’s a sauna in here! Wow, the temperature went way up while we were out!” Marie exclaimed.

“Yeah, that’s summer for you. I’ll open the windows and air out the place, so could you prepare the usual, Marie?” I was referring to Marie’s method of cooling the room with the help of her ice spirit.

The “Roger that,” I heard as she walked toward the bathroom sounded a bit listless from the heat. I called out some words of encouragement back at her as I walked barefoot across the flooring and opened the curtains and windows. The warm air flowed out of the room, but we would need to aim the fan out of the window for some time to get it circulating.

“Hmm, this heat is too much to bear. Now... the ‘high’ button should be this one.” Then, Wridra walked over after taking off her boots and took over the fan. She plopped down on the ground with her legs crossed, directing the wind toward herself and tossing her socks aside with complete disregard for etiquette.

“Wridra, you’re only making the hot air circulate if you turn the fan that way.”

“I cannot help it. I may be a draconian, but the heat is unbearable. Do not mind me, and go help Mariabelle or something.” Wridra made a shooing gesture with her hands, her draconian horns fully visible on her forehead. She peeled off the sweaty shirt clinging to her skin and exposed her back, and then

the area from her spine to her tailbone became covered in a black, rigid material. It seemed she intended to reveal herself down to her tail in preparation to relax here as much as possible.

I then noticed Shirley had removed herself from my body before I realized it, and she floated closer to the fan. She poked it with a semi-transparent finger. Maybe she had an interest in home appliances? I had to throw in the towel with two of the women going after it. I gave up on regaining control of the fan and decided to go help Mariabelle.

I passed through the door next to my bed and headed toward the bathroom to the right of the washroom. Marie was sitting next to the bathtub full of water, poking at its surface with her finger. She noticed I was standing there and turned around, her long ears already out in the open.

“Oh, I just started making the ice.”

“I thought I’d help you carry it once it’s ready. Mind if I sit next to you?” I couldn’t just admit that I had the fan taken away by the Arkdragon.

She gestured for me to go ahead, so I took a seat next to her. I peered into the tub and found something that looked like a jellyfish floating in the water. This was what one would call an ice spirit, and it floated there to create ice for us to cool the room.

As I watched it curiously, I realized I was also being observed by a pair of pale purple eyes.

I wondered what she was thinking about, and her finger poked my chest instead of the water.

“Where’s Shirley?”

“Not here.” I had replied so frankly because I kind of had a feeling I knew what was coming.

“I see,” she replied simply. She averted her eyes, her long ears turning slightly pink.

“It’s nice and cool just sitting here. I feel a bit hot from walking around all day. Would you like to cool down here with me?” Maybe it was because the room

was so dim because of the closed blinds, or maybe it was the way her hair flowed freely, but there was a strangely mature charm to her in that moment. Or maybe it was the way she whispered quietly so the others couldn't hear us. Her gaze suddenly turned from me to the water again.

“Oh, you fall asleep so easily. Come on, wake up.”

The water rippled as she touched it with her finger, and the jellyfish started swimming around leisurely again. There was something comical about its unhurried movement, as if it was saying, “Oops, fell asleep.”

“He takes naps if you take your eyes off of him. That’s why I have to keep asking him to wake up. Maybe you’d like me to wake up that sleepy face of yours, too?” With that, she raised her wet hand and brushed it against my cheek. It was chill to the touch like melted snow, and it felt like any hint of drowsiness would have vanished in an instant. Though, I only *looked* like I wanted to sleep; I wasn’t actually sleepy at all.

But it did feel nice. Being touched by Marie’s smooth finger was somehow comforting even in the dimly lit bathroom. Her purple eyes grew just a little closer.

“Oh? You still look sleepy to me. Wake up, Kazuhiro-san.” I couldn’t tell her that I was born with this face. I felt her soft lips suddenly press against my own. Her wet hand moved over from my cheek to behind my neck, then down my back. Just then, that sweet smell of hers filled my senses.

I remembered what she had said when she first summoned the ice spirit. She had said that heat was drawn to cold objects, and that heat was also taken away.

It had dawned on me that this was true. Her cool lips drew heat away from me, and our body temperatures soon matched each other’s.

She exhaled, and I felt my vision go darker. I held her slender waist in my arms, and she tucked some hair behind her ear with a hand as she turned toward the door. After confirming that no one was there, she mounted me from the front.

She shushed me quietly with a finger up to her lips, as if to say that we’d be in

trouble if that black cat caught us. “That’s true,” I said with a serious face, and she giggled.

“It was really hot today, but I had so much fun. How about you?”

“I’d probably get scolded if I admitted it was worth taking a day off. There are all sorts of annoying things you need to deal with as a working adult.” I could feel her stomach moving against me with each giggle. I casually held her waist to make sure she didn’t fall, wondering if that kiss from earlier was some sort of token of appreciation for our day trip. Then, Marie narrowed her eyes like precious stones and gave me a suspicious look.

“Now, it’s about time you come clean. You made some especially delicious vegetable dishes just so I’d get over my hate for veggies, didn’t you?”

It was hard to dodge the question when she brought it up so suddenly and directly. I averted my eyes, and she laughed, “I knew it!” as she leaned her weight onto me. Our bodies pressed together, and I could sense the feel of her breasts through the thin fabric of our clothes.

We moved our hands to each other’s backs, and her lips parted to let out a sigh right next to my ear.

It was like I had been put under a spell. Only a shred of my rational thought remained, and self-restraint had gone out the window. There was no sense of shame or nervousness. All I wanted to do was embrace her featherlight body and feel her warmth.

I already spent all day and night thinking about her, and she pressed her lips against mine once again. The kiss from before was just a teaser. This was the real deal. My slightly parted lips were completely sealed with hers as they came together.

This was my first love. I stroked the groove around her tailbone and she wrapped her sweaty arms around me as I felt it in my heart.

I was truly glad that I was now able to love someone.

I didn’t think anyone would understand, but I couldn’t help but be filled with joy.

After all, I didn't think I would ever be loved by anyone.

I wasn't able to have a proper conversation with anyone until I was in the upper grades of elementary school, after I had moved from Tokyo to Aomori. Everyone knew me as an oddball from Tokyo until I graduated. I was surprised by how much things had changed.

We placed our chins on each other's shoulders, still holding each other while breathing shallow breaths.

Marie could probably feel my rapid heartbeat, too. Hers was like a drum beating in my ears. I could vaguely see those characteristic long, elven ears of hers were a bit droopy and trembling softly.

She whispered quietly into my ear.

"See? You're always plotting such wicked thoughts. Nobody seems to have noticed but me. I'm the only one who knows that side of you very well. Do you understand?" she asked softly, and it was all over for me. I told her I yielded, then asked her a question of my own as she sat there cheerfully with her legs hanging loosely.

"So, did you like the summer vegetables?"

"Yes, they were so good that I can't wait to grow some. We'll have freshly harvested vegetables all to ourselves. We already got Shirley's permission, so I'd love to plant some corn one day, too." This was a woman who could even recreate a modern air conditioner. I was sure she would do as she said, and I could already picture her brilliant smile as she picked vegetables on a hot summer day.

I told her she was adorable, and she replied, "Is that so?" with a look that told me she wasn't displeased by the compliment. As we continued with our silly conversation, I noticed the jellyfish had fallen asleep, floating serenely in the water.

Whoosh! The fan blades whirled around with great intensity, delivering an unbelievably refreshing gust of wind. I felt the sweat drying off of my body, and I couldn't help but let out a sigh of relief.

"You can't underestimate the power of vaporizing ice, considering it's almost

as effective as an air conditioner,” I noted.

“Oh? But if you can chill the air, all you need to do is add circulation to achieve the same effect. The principle is simple. You just need to use ice like this. Anyone could do it, really.” Marie squatted down next to me, shamelessly lifting the hem of her skirt as she spoke. “Not that I’d tell anyone how to do it,” she added playfully.

She smiled merrily, but she was exposing a dangerous amount of her pale thighs...

Oh, I shouldn't stare.

I casually averted my eyes from her captivating thighs. Everything about her down to her colorful lips was so attractive that I found it downright troubling.

In any case, it seemed we were ready to stave off another hot, sleepless night. Satisfied, I stood up and approached the window that I had left open to let the hot air out. It was starting to get darker outside, and our day of sightseeing was coming to an end. A part of me felt a bit sad about it, and the sound of cicadas grew quieter when I shut the window.

Meanwhile, the floating ice spirit jellyfish was keeping busy. It hovered this way and that to manage the blocks of ice, giving its utmost effort to make sure the room was at a comfortable temperature. Though, it made me sleepy watching the way it drifted about.

“It’s nice and cool in here, but the one drawback is that we can’t let anyone else see this.”

“Hm? I have heard the Japanese are quite studious, but are they able to speak Elvish, as well?” Wridra asked, and I looked over to find her reading a newspaper. She had spread it out on the table, and it was a strange sight seeing her reading something other than the sports column. As an aside, she was reading the four-panel manga section first.

Her clavicles were visible under her loose-fitting t-shirt, the strap of her purple bra peeking out. Her dragon tail dangled from the back of her chair, and clearly, she wanted to spend the day in leisure in comfortable clothing.

“Oh, not at all. I’m probably the only one in Japan who knows how to speak

it.” I was a bit taken aback by her sudden question and simply shook my head. Wridra then glanced toward the fan. To be more precise, she was looking at Shirley, who was staring into the fan. The semi-transparent woman seemed to notice her gaze and met her eyes.

“Shirley, is there something like a jellyfish floating there?”

“...?” She looked rather confused by the question, then looked around the room. This caught me by surprise, considering it was floating right in front of her face.

“Wait, what’s going on?” I asked.

“A spirit can only be seen by those who are as pure as a newborn or animals with keen instincts. However, if one can speak their language, they will be able to sense their presence,” Wridra said as she flipped the page. So that probably meant I could see it because I could speak Elvish.

“There is no need for you to learn this, but I suppose I will go into more detail. I said earlier today, ‘When in Rome, do as the Romans do,’ but spirits have adapted to Japan just as Shirley did.” An idea seemed to come to her, and the Arkdragon extended her finger and continued talking while crafting something. Black particles gradually began to form a shape, and my eyes were drawn to the curious sight.

“Spirits, which exist in all things, are beings similar to the myriad of gods in existence. They are therefore easy to be swayed by emotions of that region, making them susceptible to change. Thus, they understand the thoughts of the Japanese folk.” This reminded me of Shintoism, a religion that was featured in shrines since the old days of Japan. It was, in essence, a worship of nature, and similar teachings were known throughout the world.

“In other words, the practitioner themselves must also understand the true nature of the words being spoken, or the spirits would not give them the time of day. Of course, this means they would be far from able to see the spirits’ physical form.”

“Hm, so that’s how it works. Come to think of it, I wasn’t able to control spirits in Japan until I finally started learning how to speak Japanese,” Marie said as she put on her apron and head wrap. Seeing this, I realized it was time to start

preparing dinner. I stood up and walked after her, but wanted to confirm one important thing and turned to Wridra.

“So, does that mean Kaoruko won’t be able to see the spirit?”

“It is highly unlikely that she could, unless she has an exceptional aptitude for it. She may live in this country, but if she is unable to speak the language of spirits, she would have to live like an elf, surrounded in nature and constantly in tune with water, wind, earth, and fire.” Maybe it was because she was reading a newspaper, but she certainly did put it in confusing terms. In any case, this meant there would be no problem if our guest came over to discuss the destination of our little trip. That was a relief.

As Wridra finished her explanation, it seemed she was done crafting, too. The black particles were reborn as black-rimmed glasses, which she placed on her face and asked, “How do I look?”

I mean, there’s not a lot of things you don’t look good in.

Wridra flashed a satisfied smile, and I moved over to Marie, who was washing vegetables.

She was already clever to begin with, so she had picked up all the basic cooking methods already. Still, different dishes took different seasoning and prepping methods, so I had to teach her each time depending on what we were cooking. I washed the rest of the veggies in the basket, then taught Marie how to cut the eggplants.

“Tempura tastes better when you deep fry it quickly, so you need to cut into them to make sure it cooks evenly.” I deftly cut into the eggplants with the kitchen knife, then spread them out in the shape of a fan. They were white on the inside, despite their dark exterior, so they looked colorful when laid out like this.

“It doesn’t matter if it’s straight or diagonal. You just need to cut them evenly like this.”

“Just like you were doing yesterday, right? I’ll give it a try.” Marie used the kitchen knife with practiced hands, and I was relieved to see she had gotten used to using them. She really was a fast learner. Teaching a disciple like her

would be very rewarding if she ever studied under a master. Though, come to think of it, Wridra was already her master when it came to magic. It was no wonder the Arkdragon treated her with so much care. I decided to let Marie handle the prep work and started to get the sweet and spicy dipping sauce ready.

Steam was coming out of the rice cooker, and I could see through the window that it was getting darker outside. I looked up at the clock on the wall, and it was already about to be seven o'clock.

We were cooking for four tonight, and we were making tempura, so it was a race against the clock. I prepared the batter like last time, and then I... didn't put it into the refrigerator, and instead turned around. The jellyfish floated there, and I placed the bowl on top of it. The bowl would be chilled in no time, so spirits were quite convenient even when it came to cooking.

Wridra had been reading a newspaper, but she had to set it aside when she started to smell the sizzling tempura. Her nose twitched, and she got up and came up to me like she did when she was a cat.

Shirley held on to her shoulders, and they peered in together to see what I was doing. I could sense their restlessness, so I turned around while continuing to work with my hands.

"Sorry, we need to hurry tonight, and there's just enough for the four of us, so you won't be able to try any until they're done."

"Gah...! V-Very well, then I shall accept just one of those eggplants there!"

Yup, like I said, no eating until they're all done.

I made an "X" with my fingers at her, and the dragon's eyebrows drooped before my eyes. She looked like she was about to cry. She was so expressive that I couldn't help sympathizing with her, but my "X" didn't waver.

Suddenly, Wridra perked up, her face brightening as if she had come up with a brilliant idea.

"Y-Yes, then consider this. In exchange for one of my Arkdragon's scales...!"

"Shoo! It'll be ready soon, so be patient and wait over there!" Marie's

intensity startled Wridra, and even Shirley, for some reason. But she just looked cute in my eyes, like a little kitten getting upset.

I watched Wridra slink away, dejected, and continued to deep fry the rest of the vegetables. Once I was done, it was time to bring out the main dish: shrimp. I had pretreated them so they wouldn't curl up, and I decided to fry them in front of Marie. To be honest, I was a bit nervous. I wanted to use a frying technique that made the tempura look bigger called hana-age, but I had barely any experience with it.

"Okay... We just add a bit of the thinned out batter like so..." I used my chopsticks to add bits of batter as the shrimp fried in the oil. It was pretty difficult, considering I only had a limited amount of time to fry it. Marie's eyes were bright with wonder as she watched with great interest.

"Wow, it's getting bigger. It's like a blooming flower."

"That's why it's called hana-age, or 'flower frying.' Making the batter bigger doesn't make it taste better or anything, so we gotta be careful not to overdo it. Yeah, that should do." The sweet scent of the tempura dipping sauce filled the kitchen along with the smell of freshly deep fried batter and vegetables, and Wridra's patience was reaching its limit. I could tell by the way she was unconsciously tapping her foot.

I removed the tempura from the oil and was relieved to see that they came out okay, despite not looking perfect. The doorbell rang as I picked up the next piece of shrimp, letting me know that our guest was here.

"I'll fry the rest, so can you go greet our guest?" Marie said. I had to say, I appreciated how dependable she was. I couldn't have asked for a better partner in the underground labyrinth, but I couldn't have imagined that she would be just as reliable when making dinner.

I went to open the front door just behind the kitchen... but first, I turned around.

"Wridra, your tail and horn..."

"Hmph." Despite her pouting, any trace of Wridra's tail and horn had already completely vanished. She must have sensed that we had a visitor. Well, she was

as sharp as always.

I glanced over to Shirley in front of the fan and reached out to her. She took my hand, then floated into the air and haunted me. I then immediately felt a bit of hunger and fatigue hit me. Thinking that I should eat as soon as possible, I finally answered the door.

I pushed the door open.

There stood a woman with well-kempt, shoulder-length hair. It was completely dark outside already, and she did a small wave with her hand.

“Good evening. The food’s almost ready, so please, come in.”



“Oh, that smells nice. Hello, Marie! And you must be her friend, Wridra? I heard you over the phone earlier.” Wridra was still sitting in her chair as she greeted the newcomer. It was times like these that I got the impression that she was shy around strangers. She smiled quietly, her face so attractive that she even made other women blush. Kaoruko probably thought she was mysterious, but she was pretty much the personification of endless appetite.

As for Shirley, she seemed to be scared of Kaoruko as the woman put on some slippers and entered the room. I was a bit worried, but I hoped she would get used to her after seeing us all get along with each other.

After entering the room, Kaoruko began looking around the room curiously. She was wearing a blouse and pants, her attire plain, like what she wore while working at the library. Then, she stopped and stared at a certain point.

“Huh. What is that white thing floating over there?” She pointed directly at the ice spirit, and a loud thud was heard. It was the sound of Wridra jumping up from her seat, and me getting hit right in the waist.

I rubbed my waist painfully and glared at Wridra with a look that said “Didn’t you say she wouldn’t be able to see it?!” and she shot back a look that said “She should not have been able to!” Alarmingly, Marie was completely focused on frying the shrimp, so she didn’t even notice what was going on. That meant we couldn’t even call the spirit away. Sweat ran down my face, and everything around me seemed to move in slow motion as if I was using Acceleration.

Calm down. Calm down and think, Kazuhiho. What would happen if I laughed it off and told her it’s an ice fairy?

It probably wasn’t likely, but worst case scenario, the media may have come here to report on us. If that happened, I may no longer be able to bring Marie to this world...

I could almost hear my brain cells working in overdrive. Seriously, I couldn’t think of the last time I had been cornered so badly. Even during my clash with the hero candidate Zarish, I was able to stay composed enough to enjoy myself somewhat.

“Well, we were just doing a little science experiment before you showed up.

You know, it's the kind that uses dry ice. It's featured on TV a lot, so you might have seen it. One moment while I clean up."

"Oh? Huh, I see. Dry ice?" she asked. I smiled pleasantly, then naturally moved between her and the ice spirit.

She probably hadn't gotten a good look at it yet. If she did, she likely would have screamed. And by using phrases like "featured on TV" and "experiment," the image in her mind should have slowly changed into that of smoke from dry ice.

Yes, I'm sure that will work. Please work. Please.

Then, staying calm and collected, I ignored the coldness in my hand as I grabbed the ice spirit and headed toward the bathroom. I slid the door open, then tossed it into the bathroom.

"Sorry, I'll come back for you later, so can you hang out here for a while?" I whispered. It proceeded to float about, as if to say, "Sure, whatever." Maybe it was because I had interrupted its work, or maybe it was because I had grabbed it so roughly, but it looked a bit upset. I decided to apologize to it properly later.

Then, I slowly peered into the living room.

I saw Kaoruko sitting at the table and having a chat with Wridra. Finally, I let out a sigh of relief. I had thought I was going to have a heart attack. But why was she able to see the spirit? The question popped up in my mind as I slowly breathed in and out several times.

Yes, I was calm again. I decided to step out and act as natural as I could. She may have caught a glimpse of the spirit, but an ordinary person wouldn't have been able to understand what it was. There was no way she would question it. I breathed in deeply again, then went back out to the living room. As I stepped through the door, Kaoruko turned around with a smile on her face.

"Oh, welcome back. I was wondering, what is that next to the fan?" My heart jumped in my chest, having been questioned immediately after walking back to the living room. I wasn't mentally prepared, and I fought the urge to curl up into a ball.

I slowly turned to the direction where she was pointing. My heart pounding,

my gaze moved toward the fan...

“How did you make that block of ice? It’s even bigger than your fridge.”

“Oh, yes, that. I actually got it from a friend of mine who owns an ice shop. I heard it keeps your room cool. It’s actually part of the science experiment I mentioned,” I replied.

“Ohh,” she said, impressed, and I felt the strength leaving my body. In the corner of my vision, I saw Wridra waving her hand and gesturing “Good save!” followed by an “I’m starving”... but I ignored her for now.

Whew, that was close.

I had thought that maybe Kaoruko was pointing at the ice and not the spirit in the first place. But then I reconsidered, thinking it would have been strange for her to call it a white thing floating there. Just then, I remembered she was born in Hokkaido. Though, what did that have to do with anything?

Hmm, could her environment have been so rife with nature that she was accustomed to spirits...?

As I considered this, Marie called out to me.

“I finished frying the rest. Can you help me serve the food please?”

“Sure, let’s put them on some rice, then.” There were still some questions left unanswered, but I decided to go back to the food for now.

Though, since the frying part was done, there wasn’t much work left to do. I scooped some rice into bowls, placed the tempura on top, then poured the sauce to complete the dish. They were an appetizing array of red, green, and yellow, and the smell of freshly-fried tempura mixed with the sweet and sour soy sauce was simply heavenly.

“Okay, all done. Now, let’s... Oh, we don’t have enough chairs.” I realized it was about time we bought new chairs. It was usually just Marie and me in here, and it was very rare to have two guests over. In fact, we had three visitors today, if we included Shirley.

It was quite careless of me to forget the chairs after inviting people over for dinner. As I wondered what I should do, Kaoruko placed her hands together as

if an idea came to her.

“I know! I live directly above your place, so why don’t we bring the food up there? My husband is still at work, and I have plenty of travel magazines at my place.” It was nice of her to offer, but I felt bad about intruding on her home. Though, there was that scare we had with the spirit, so I reconsidered and thought it may be better to go there instead.

“Then I’d like to take you up on your kind offer. Okay, can everyone bring one bowl each?”

Everyone cheered and each picked up a bowl. Our group walked out with bowls in hand, which was kind of an odd sight. Marie, Wridra, and even Kaoruko exchanged looks, holding in their laughter. It was Marie that burst out laughing first. She broke out into a fit of laughter, unable to take a step out of fear of dropping her bowl. Her feet were pointed inward, her legs trembling like that of a newborn calf.

Strangely, these inexplicable fits of laughter had a tendency to spread to others. The others tried their hardest to hold it in and slapped Marie’s shoulders to urge her forward.

I couldn’t help but wonder why we were having such difficulty with the simple task of getting on the elevator. We safely made it into the elevator without dropping a single bowl, and we all let out a sigh of relief.

We giggled among each other, and then the door opened, and a man from another floor entered... I felt my face grow hot with embarrassment.

“Whoa, surprised me there. Ha ha, that looks tasty,” he said jokingly.

“Yes, we’re about to eat it together,” I replied. The man, who seemed to be past retirement age, looked at us with surprise and closed the door. The smell of eggplant, pumpkin, and shrimp filled the small room, and he gulped audibly at all the golden tempura bowls before him.

“I was about to eat dinner, but all I can think of now is tempura bowls and beer.” The elevator was filled with laughter from his playful comment. We laughed harder than intended from holding it in for so long, and I tried to apologize, but I couldn’t get it under control.

That was a rather strange and unexpected encounter, but we bowed upon arriving at our floor, and we finally made it to Kaoruko's home.

"Ah, that was fun. That man seemed really nice," Marie said.

"Hah, hah, that was quite comical indeed. However, my sides cannot take much more." With that, we removed our shoes and entered Kaoruko's home through the entrance.

It was just Kaoruko and her husband Toru living in the Ichijo household, and their room was far bigger than mine, in consideration for their future. The size went from 1 LDK to 2 LDK, so the room size had basically doubled.

I stared longingly for some time, but then I felt Marie tug at my shirt.

"Wow! Look, look! The TV is so big!"

"Watching movies is the only hobby we have in common, so we ended up getting a big one. Marie, Wridra, please feel free to come over at any time to watch something." Kaoruko smiled kindly. Considering she was the type of person who had wanted to be friends with Marie since the first day they had met, I was sure she would give her utmost effort to make her guests feel welcome.

Marie turned to me, but I of course had no reason to argue. Although she usually had the black cat around for company, I was worried about leaving her alone while I was at work. I nodded, and Marie's face lit up with joy.

We decided to have dinner before discussing the day of our trip. We each took a seat on the sofa, then picked up our chopsticks after preparing some tea. After the customary pre-meal "Itadakimasu," Marie and Wridra went for the shrimp, which was the main star of the meal.

Their teeth easily bit through it with a satisfying crunch. The aroma first hit them like a jab, the fragrance of the shrimp spreading throughout their mouths. Shrimp had a savory flavor that was distinct to seafood, and the umami burst from it with every bite. The plump and juicy shrimp grew dangerously tasty when enhanced by the sweet and spicy tempura sauce. It was no wonder their mouths overflowed with saliva as they savored the texture of their food.

As they ate, their taste buds sought the white rice peeking out from the bowl

to compliment the main dish. This was likely an instinctive reaction for those who were accustomed to Japanese food. Though, the rice was already delicious by itself, having soaked up all that sauce.

They vigorously scooped the fresh-cooked white rice into their mouths and mixed it with the shrimp. Then, the flood of umami and the rice's sweetness overtook their senses. The two let out a sigh, then exchanged looks while continuing to chew. They let out strange, muffled laughs, then finally swallowed their mouthfuls of food.

"Mmm, the shrimp tempura is sooo good! It's got such a light, refined flavor, but it compliments the rice so perfectly!"

"Delicious...! Hnng, what a mistake it was to avoid them until now due to their bug-like appearance! My apologies, shrimp!"

Well, the ladies from the fantasy world certainly made wonderful facial expressions as usual. It seemed they were really into the sweet and spicy flavor and continued to dig in with enthusiasm. They were enjoying their meal so much that it was fun just watching them.

Oh, me? I still can't taste or smell the food, of course.

Though, I could feel Shirley thinking "Delicious!" so maybe this wasn't all that bad. It was a lot more satisfying when other people enjoyed my cooking rather than me tasting it myself.

"Mmm, this dipping sauce must be what's making the tempura match the rice so well! It's scary to imagine just how far Japan has gone in their research for delicious food." Marie happened to meet eyes with Kaoruko, who was staring at the elf girl the same way I was. Kaoruko turned red for some reason, then awkwardly bit into her tempura. Her teeth sank into it with a soft crunch, and her eyes widened.

"Oh, this tastes better than when I make it. You fried it so well."

"To be honest, Marie deserves the praise. She's a great cook, and more than half of them were fried by her." It was too bad Marie was busy reaching for some vegetable tempura and didn't hear the compliment.

The warm, soft eggplant was especially delicious. Marie's shoulders trembled,

and then she appeared to remember the rice and began hurriedly shoveling some into her mouth.

However, there was one thing that was missing from this meal. I could tell from the look on Marie's face that she was missing a certain something that we usually enjoyed with our food. But she and Wridra immediately perked up at our host's next question.

"Oh, that's right. Do you two drink?"

"Yes!"

"I do!"

The two women immediately raised their hands, and Kaoruko's eyes widened. Most people didn't expect Mariabelle to drink alcohol when she looked like she could be a middle schooler. That "you two" had actually been directed at Wridra and me.

"Marie, you can't drink until you're twenty, right?"

"...?!"

Of course, there would have been no problem if she did drink, considering she was over a hundred years old. But we had our circumstances while living in Japan. It seemed Marie finally remembered this, and her expression slowly turned sadder and sadder. I couldn't help but feel sorry for her, so I declined, too.

Of course, Wridra didn't care a bit about reading the room, and responded with, "Then, I shall have some!" This was actually very bad. Kaoruko poured some cold sake to match with the tempura, and Wridra couldn't get enough of it. The ginjo sake had a fruity aroma that lingered on her breath as she exhaled. After savoring the aftertaste for some time, her taste buds were ready to enjoy some more tempura.

Marie watched the Arkdragon's expression of pure bliss with her shoulders trembling in frustration, and I couldn't bear to watch. And so, I secretly decided to get Marie some ginjo sake to try later.

With our meal having come to an end, it was time to discuss the main topic of

our travel destination.

Kaoruko often traveled with her husband Toru, and she had been occasionally helping us by sharing her knowledge. The tempura bowl I had served her was, in part, a token of appreciation for all she had given us. But when I told her we wanted to go to the beach, she furrowed her brows with a troubled look.

“Hmm, during Obon, the busiest time of the year...? And we don’t have a lot of time until the big day... All the good places are surely booked by now.”

“Ah, I figured it might be difficult... Still, I’d like to avoid big crowds, if possible.” Taking a day trip somewhere local would have been the easiest method. But such a beach would be filled with vacationers from all over the city, so it probably would have been completely packed. I couldn’t imagine the girls would have fun swimming somewhere like that. In that case, it was probably better to just go on a trip somewhere in the dream world instead.

I didn’t mind staying somewhere distant because I had gotten my bonus, but it seemed the nicer hotels always tended to get booked first, even if they were a bit pricey. It wasn’t as if people stayed at these places all the time, so it was human nature to want to stay somewhere nice. I listed some places off of my wish list, but Kaoruko still looked rather grim.

“Unfortunately, everywhere is crowded during Obon. So, maybe we should change our way of thinking.” I looked at her, confused, and she spread open a travel magazine before me. It featured fireworks decorating the night sky, and Marie and Wridra leaned over to get a better look.

“For example, some places have fireworks shows during particularly busy times. Since it will be busy everywhere, it may be a better idea to find ways to have fun *because* it will be busy.”

I see, so these busy periods are actually when events are most enjoyable.

So, maybe it was better to save the sandy white beach for the dream world and enjoy some fireworks in Japan instead. But, we still had one problem...

If it wasn’t for that border restriction... I thought to myself.

We had to wipe out the rebels hiding in the labyrinth in order to clear the border restriction, but I still didn’t know if we would be able to pull it off.

Though, strangely, that somehow felt easier than the feat of finding a beach in Japan that wasn't completely crowded.

"Besides, there are plenty of places for entertainment and sightseeing other than the beach. In this region, for example..."

"What? Open-air hot springs with a full view of the sea?!" Wridra exclaimed in disbelief. I didn't realize we could even get access to hot springs in some locations. Not to mention, a lot of these places even came with rooms to stay in. I didn't know much about these resorts, so I was quite impressed.

Mariabelle was staring at the travel magazine as she listened to our conversation. She inspected the section introducing various tourist attractions, then uttered quietly to herself.

"Banana Wani Park..."

"Hm? What's that? Did you find something you like?" I asked, and she looked surprised for a moment, then shook her head. Her face turned pink, though I couldn't understand why.

"I-It's nothing. I was just surprised that there was such a childish-looking tourist resort."

"Oh? We can go somewhere else, if you'd like. There are a bunch of places in Chiba, too. Like here, for example..." I tried to show Marie another place, but I couldn't seem to pique her interest at all. She glanced at the article repeatedly with a pouty face, and I finally realized what was going on.

"Oh, this Banana Wani Park looks interesting. I don't think you've been to a zoo before, Marie."

"I-I suppose you could say I'm somewhat interested. I think there's a lot I could learn about Japan's ecosystem. It could end up being useful information down the line. Really!"

Well, crocodiles weren't actually part of Japan's ecosystem, but that was okay. It was obvious that she really wanted to go by the way she was fidgeting with embarrassment. It was nice seeing her adorable and innocent side, and I wanted to see more of that cute expression of hers.

“It’s decided, then. How about we book a hotel in that area and check out the beach, fireworks show, hot springs, and Banana Wani Park?”

“O-Oh! We have no choice, if it’s already been decided. I suppose I’ll do a lot of research there for the sake of my future.” What knowledge about crocodiles was going to be useful for her future? Maybe she planned on going on a savanna tour? As I pondered to myself, Kaoruko smiled brightly.

“Oh, there are many hotels around there, so you should be able to find a room. So, have we decided on Higashiizu for the destination, then?” Everyone was all smiles as they expressed their agreement. Well, I didn’t think I would be so excited to visit Higashiizu during summer in Japan.

I tried calling a hotel the next day and found out someone had just canceled their reservation, so I was fortunately able to book a room. The homepage stated that they were fully booked, but Wridra had advised me to give them a call. It was scary how sharp the Arkdragon’s intuition could be at times.

And so, our summer plans were steadily getting solidified.

I wanted to prepare for the trip in Japan first, then take Marie to a pool before we went to the beach. She had mentioned that she didn’t like swimming when we were flying on the Magic Stone, and I figured it would be better to practice while having fun at the same time.

And once Obon rolled around, we would travel to Izu. I never thought I would go to Higashiizu during summer vacation, having been somewhat of a recluse. I had experienced so many changes ever since these girls entered my life.

On the other hand, we had things like growing crops and raiding the third floor coming up. I also wondered what Wridra and Shirley had been up to in the forest, but I was sure they would tell me when the time was right.

Marie grabbed a marker and stood on her tiptoes to mark the calendar in our room. She wrote “Izu, Banana Wani Park” for the day of our trip and circled our days off during Obon in red. Shirley had already come out of my body and floated over to Marie to take a look. It seemed she found the felt tip pen interesting.

“That should do it! Ohh, I can’t wait! I’m not sure if I can even sleep from all

the excitement.”

“It’s still many days away, Marie. We should go to bed soon, or you won’t be able to grow any crops,” I said as I carried the jellyfish over from the bathroom. It seemed quite upset from having been left in there for so long, and a portion of the bath was frozen solid despite it being the middle of summer. I thought we had been getting along nicely, so I was a bit sad when it moved away as I reached out with my finger.

Wridra glanced up from the bed where she had been laying down and reading a magazine.

“I did some research out of curiosity, and it appears Kaoruko is from the mountains in Hokkaido. She may have the blood of the so-called Ainu tribe.”

Ainu... A vague image of hunters with patterns all over their bodies came to mind, but I wasn’t sure what they had to do with anything. Wridra crossed her legs while laying on her back and opened the magazine toward us. The page she showed us featured a Japanese person wearing a tribal outfit.

“They were supposedly tribal people, much like the elves. They were one with nature, and so she may have an affinity with spirits due to being related to them by blood. Though, this is simply a conclusion I came to with bits and pieces of information, combined with my intuition.”

“Oh, you’re talking about what happened earlier! So, that’s why she was able to see it...” I didn’t expect to find such fantasy elements here in Japan, too. But come to think of it, there were many mysterious things about this country. For example, during the Jomon period, the Ainu people were said to live off of just hunting and gathering without moving away from their land. This was during a time when farming hadn’t even been conceived yet.

This sort of lifestyle was pretty much unheard of, even in global terms. Most civilizations, like the Mongols, repeatedly migrated from one place to another. This just went to show just how close the Ainu’s relationship with nature was. They had survived with just hunting and gathering down to modern times, which gave me the impression that they had always cherished harmony with nature since the old days.

This was one of the interesting things about Japan. When everyone else in the

world had already given up on something, the Japanese had a mysterious drive to accomplish things as if it was the norm.

“Does that mean she could be a spirit user too?”

“That I do not know. You yourself can see them, but are unable to control them. However, it is clear that she is more suited for it than any given random commoner.” I replied to her with a noncommittal noise, not quite sure if I understood. Still, Kaoruko and I may have been close, but I couldn’t tell her about the dream world. There was no telling what could happen, so I avoided taking any unnecessary risks. As such, this topic would be set aside for now.

I noticed Marie was looking up at the calendar, and I gently put my hand on her flower-print pajamas. I then picked her up from behind her knees and lifted her, and I saw her eyes fill with joy.

“Oh, am I being sent to bed now? It’s like I’m a child being punished for staying up too late.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t be the one saying this, but they say sleep brings up a child well, Lady Marie.” She was as light as ever. I mentally noted how nice she felt in my arms, and she wrapped her arms behind my neck. She must have liked being carried to the bed, because she started swaying her legs in a happy mood.

I turned around and showed my back invitingly to Shirley, and her sky blue eyes also lit up with joy. She held onto my shoulders as usual, and the ghost haunted me once again. I turned around to face her.

“How was your first day in Japan, Shirley? I hope you had fun.”

Her eyes widened, and she burst out in laughter. She looked at me as if she wanted to say, “There’s no way I *didn’t* have fun.” I was glad she felt that way. Since she was here, I wanted her to enjoy this foreign land to the fullest.

I probably felt this way because I had come to understand her feelings. As I spent my day off with her, she had shared her emotions with me while she enjoyed the scenery and food here. I was able to feel them directly, as the host whose body she was sharing.

But I had also felt her deepest internal emotions at the same time. It sounded like she was crying, like a child that had been lost and left behind. This was just

conjecture on my part, but I felt as if it all stemmed from being bound to the second floor all alone for so long. So, maybe that forlorn emotion inside of her was a fear of being all alone again. Yet, I still didn't realize something at this point. Beyond that comfortable bed, inside the dream world, was the very thing that would resolve Shirley's troubles.

I laid Marie down on the bed, and I also laid down in the dim room, lit only by indirect lighting. She immediately put her leg over mine, the comfortable warmth of her body drawing me closer to sleep. Then, she whispered near my ear in a slightly grumpy tone.

"Oh no, I'm about to yawn already. Say, did you know?" I wondered what she was about to bring up and stared at her as I pulled up her comforter. It was a particularly breathable comforter for summer use, and its smooth texture felt nice on the skin. I listened closely as I heard rustling behind me, which I assumed to be Wridra undressing herself.

Marie's eyes were heavy with sleep, and after a moment, her lips slowly parted to speak.

"I hear people and animals get sleepy when they feel satisfied. Like, when their stomach is full, or when they eat delicious food... Oh, I suppose that's pretty much the same thing. And one more thing... Your warm body makes me feel so sleepy that it surprises me."

Just as she finished her sentence, she let out a cute little yawn. She looked up at me as if to say "See?" but it seemed to me that she was trying to put me to sleep, too. The warmth of her body, the steady beating of her heart, and her breath on my neck were all so inviting.

I turned around to find Shirley also yawning with her mouth wide open, and we all laughed. It seemed our sleepiness had spread to her, even though she had no need to sleep at all. Shirley turned red and slowly receded back into my body. She had decided to call it a day before we teased her.

The bed creaked, and someone's soft body pressed up against me from behind. Wridra the Arkdragon had also taken a liking to our warm little sleeping spot. She stretched her limbs out wide and shivered like she did when she was a cat. Then, she let out a satisfied breath right next to my ear.

“You should know that this boy can inflict the sleep status effect even on me. I sometimes wonder if he is some sort of monster, able to slip through my total immunity like this.” I never would have guessed that the Arkdragon would come to fear me someday. Though, in her case, she was probably just sleepy from all the eating and drinking she had done today.

Her black, silky hair tickled as it landed on me.

I felt myself inching closer to sleep with each exhalation.

Only our breathing could be heard in the otherwise silent room for some time.

I was ready to fall asleep under the comforter in the dimly lit room, and the feeling of skin on skin was quite comforting.

We had so much fun today. We laughed and laughed over nothing in particular. Such memories popped into my mind as I let out a satisfied sigh... and the quiet sound of our breathing in our sleep filled the room.

The ice spirit that was floating around would surely fall asleep soon, too.

§

Chirp, chirp...

A strange creature appeared in my blurry vision.

My mind began to clear as it processed the sight of its cute little eyes and its beak pointed toward me.

The sky was already bright, and it was a world of greenery in contrast to Japan. I tried to get up, but it proved difficult while stuck between Marie and Wridra. I slowly undid the button on my chest and tried to reach for the crumbs to feed the creature, but it couldn't wait any longer.

Chiiirp! It dug its tiny head into my pocket, then ate the breakfast there without holding back. I mildly noted how energetic it was before another bird landed next to it. I hadn't expected more of them to show up.

The birds were tiny, and they were only as heavy as a fingertip resting on me. Despite that, it felt incredibly ticklish as they ate with so much enthusiasm. The ruckus seemed to reach Marie's long ears, and she opened her eyes, turning her

sleepy face toward me.

“Hmm, you’re popular with the birds as usual.”

“Good morning, Marie. I think it’s the bread that’s popular, not me.” The other arm that was around me twitched. The dragon awoke, and as soon as she let out a tired yawn, the birds all scattered at once. The blanket slid off of her body, and I looked away as her toned, naked body was revealed.

“Hm, they fled as soon as I thought about how appetizing they looked. Quite sharp, those ones.”

Wait, was she thinking of eating them? Come to think of it, she had mentioned that she’d acquired a taste for chicken in Japan. I dug into my pocket and scattered the rest of the bread crumbs I had. The birds were watching from a tree at a safe distance away, so I figured they would come back later.

Someone else had also awakened.

She slipped right out of my body as soon as I stood up. It was Shirley, the ghostly floor master of the second floor. She floated into the air as if she was submerged in water, then landed lightly on the ground with the tip of her toe. Her flowing hair and dress made it seem as if she was completely weightless.

“Hey there. Good morning, Shirley. This is how we wake up in the dream world.” Shirley blinked her sky blue eyes, then scanned her surroundings. Time still went on while we were awake in Japan, so a little more than half a day had passed in this world. Maybe she had sensed this from the color of the sky, because she turned back to me and nodded to indicate her understanding.

Now, we had to plant those pumpkin seeds and report our decision to participate in the raid on the third floor, so I slowly rose.

I picked up the branches on the ground as we made our way through the forest. The trees were similar to camphor trees, in the sense that they had a strange tendency to not only shed unnecessary leaves, but they discarded their own branches, too. Their branches were also far more fragrant than the leaves, making them quite valuable.

I looked ahead as we continued walking. We were right at a break in the forest, and the sun was coming down upon the open grass field before us. It

was still before noon, when the plants were releasing the water from underground out through their leaves. The overwhelming smell of grass and trees all around me reminded me that we were on the second floor of the labyrinth. No one could have guessed that such a place existed in the middle of the desert.

Marie walked through the grassy field behind me, taking in a deep breath as she bathed in the sunlight. Having been born and raised in a forest, this must have been quite a comforting sight.

“Everyone would be envious if they knew about this place. There’s even a river nearby, so it’s perfect for growing crops.”

“That’s right, you’ve already grown crops before. Well, that’s a relief,” I said, and Marie gestured, as if to say “Oh my, will a frail city boy like you be able to keep up?” I may have been born in Aomori, but I didn’t have much experience with farming, so I was relying on her assistance. I sat on a fallen tree, and Marie took a seat next to me.

Before we had come here, Shirley had given us permission to use this land as we wanted. It seemed she wouldn’t mind if we felled some trees, as long as we didn’t clear too much land unnecessarily.

“Come to think of it, she mentioned this was the place where the souls of the dead are circulated. Are you sure we can cut down the trees here?”

“According to Wridra, it’s okay as long as it’s recycled. The trees will return to the soil when they decay, and new buds will grow from there. Though, she did mention to be careful with fire.” If there was a fire in this world, there were no firefighters around to help, after all. But I suspected there would be no issues with a Spirit Sorceress like her.

“So, if we’re going to start farming here, how should we prepare?” I asked.

“It’ll be difficult to maintain, but we can think about that once the seeds sprout. The soil is nice and soft here. We should get rid of the weeds and start planting first.”

In that case, I wanted to handle all the physical labor. The grass was tall enough to reach my waist, but I had a lot of energy in the dream world. I rolled

up my sleeves, but Marie placed a hand on me.

“What are you doing? Aren’t we just moving the weeds out of the way?”

“Huh? I thought we were going to pull them out.” We both tilted our heads at each other.

Oh, I get it.

It seemed I had the wrong idea here. I only realized it when Marie poked at the weeds to call out their spirits.

The ground was entirely covered in weeds, but they all began moving to concentrate into one point. They merged to form stubby limbs and a cylindrical body, leaving an empty spot in the soil where the weeds used to be. I had seen many spirits until now, but this was my first time seeing a humanoid one. Though, they were short and stout like Haniwa figures.

Marie crouched down to meet the spirit at eye level.

“Hello, Dryad, spirit of plants. I have a request to ask of you. Can you take several of your peers and migrate to that sunny area over there?” she asked, and then the spirit rubbed the grass growing around his chin area, seeming to consider it. He apparently came to a decision. Flowers popped out of his head, and he began walking slowly. Several more similar-looking spirits appeared and walked away, leaving an empty plot of soil.

“Whoa, that was quick. Has it always been this easy for elves?”

“Of course. We don’t want to get all sweaty pulling weeds like humans do,” she stated, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. In any case, we were done setting up for our farm, and now we just needed to plant the pumpkin seeds. I had about twenty seeds in my pocket. I began sprinkling them over the ground, then lightly covered them with soil. All we had to do now was water them with our canteen, and then they would sprout after a few weeks if the soil and weather permitted.

“What are we doing about the fertilizer, by the way?” I asked.

“Once the earth spirit gets tired, I’ll ask another one to swap out,” she replied.

Whew, they sure have it easy, huh? I sighed in a mixture of shock and

amazement, and then I heard someone calling from behind. I turned around to find Wridra and Shirley waving at us.

The forest was getting thicker here. The sky was completely covered in branches, forming a sort of tunnel. Yet, the pathway was well maintained, and it was easy to walk through, despite the bumpy roots underfoot. The natural tunnel stretched quite far. It was quite an unusual sight, with the other end being out of view due to the winding design.

Wridra led the way ahead of us. Her black hair swayed as she turned around, seemingly unfazed by the walk.

“It appears you have finished planting the seeds. Those so-called pumpkins are sweet and delicious, so I do hope they sprout. I look forward to the other vegetables, as well.”

“We still don’t know if the soil is right for it. I can ask the spirits to make them sprout, but I’d like to leave it up to the seeds. The pumpkins won’t grow nice and strong otherwise.” I didn’t realize it worked that way. Shirley was nodding as she walked beside her, so it must have been true.

Although, I was a bit curious about Shirley’s outfit. She often wore a dress, but today she had on a navy vest and a long-sleeve shirt with a bowtie, paired with a flared, knee-length skirt. She looked like a noblewoman that chose to wear an outfit that was easy to move around in.



“Your outfit looks different today, Shirley. What’s the occasion?” I asked, and the semi-transparent woman smiled. Her navy headdress and hair curled to each side gave her smile a certain air of elegance. Marie and I looked at each other, unsure of the meaning behind her mysterious smile. Wridra had a giddy look in her eyes as she walked on ahead of us, and I figured they would be revealing the secret behind that look.

A fantastical sight awaited us beyond the tunnel. It was an enormous tree that must have been several hundred—no, maybe even over a thousand years old. The stout tree was built like multiple trees had been banded into one, and it appeared somewhat divine in our eyes. I looked up to find an expanse of vibrant, green leaves, along with many green fruits.

“Wow, what a tree. So, why’d you bring us here?” I asked.

“Hm. Do you not remember what happened here?” From the way she phrased it, it seemed she was implying I had been to this place before. By the looks on everyone’s faces, it was only Marie and I that didn’t know the answer. And so, I decided I wanted to find the answer without any hints.

I walked closer to the great tree and placed my hand against it. It felt rough to the touch, and I listened to the sound of wind passing through the treetop for some time.

So, what happened here?

First, I pictured the hall of the second floor that had once been empty. It was too dark to see much back then, but I was walking around with Shirley leading me by the hand. She had guided me to the center of the hall, and there I saw...

“Oh, that stone-built... throne?” It looked nothing like the great tree before me, but Wridra flashed a smile at my answer. She walked up and placed her hand on the tree, just as I was doing.

“Indeed, this is Shirley’s essence. And when one’s appearance changes, their entire being is greatly affected, as well. The throne that had once been sealed away now looks like this.”

I couldn’t hide my surprise. The tree’s mystical appearance had changed massively compared to its previous cold, hard form. Though, there was

something about it that felt similar to its old appearance.

Just as the wind rustled the leaves overhead, Wridra spoke.

“And I have made adjustments to her seal. Shirley would not allow me to dispel it completely. Though, I do not believe there is any need for her to accept her punishment. However, she did gain a certain power in turn.”

“Hm? What do you mean?”

Wridra gestured with her chin. I turned my gaze in the direction she indicated and saw Shirley standing there quietly. Perhaps it was just my imagination or a trick of the light, but she somehow seemed more vivid than usual.

As she stood there under the sunlight, her hair turned into a splendid honey color, and her eyes turned into a more beautifully clear sky blue.

A single leaf fell from above.

Shirley reached out, and the leaf landed on her hand.

“Ah! You can touch it? Have you finally gained a physical form?” Shirley shook her head, and Wridra answered in place of the silent woman.

The Arkdragon gently pushed my back, leading me toward Shirley as she whispered.

“A ghost can only continue to be a ghost. They are no longer alive, after all. However, they can appear as a human does by making their ghostly form more dense. I must mention, this is no miracle.” She appeared to grow bigger as we approached her. Our height difference in this world was sizable enough that I had to look up slightly to meet her gaze. Shirley was standing up straight and looking directly at me.

“Now, Kitase, Shirley is looking at you as if she would like to join your team. What will you tell her, as the leader?” I finally realized where this was all going.

Shirley couldn't participate in the raid on the third floor or walk around Arilai in her semi-transparent form. And so, she had discussed this with Wridra to have her secretly loosen the strength of her seal. This was why Wridra was already here when Marie and I had shown up. So, that was why she was dressed to go out in public.

In that case, as the leader of Team Amethyst, there was only one thing for me to say.

“Shirley, our adventure is long and arduous... Actually, it’s been nothing but fun for us.” I walked closer with my arms outstretched. Marie was lined up next to me, and Wridra was standing on the other side. There was a merry look in their eyes, and I had a feeling I wore a similar expression on my own face.

“We eat delicious food, read ancient texts, and get some occasional exercise. Why don’t you just take my word for it and join us?” Marie burst out laughing, unable to hold it in anymore. She continued to giggle while clutching at her sides, then turned to me.

“Goodness, that was a horrible speech. You sound like a kidnapper trying to trick her into following us!”

“Huh? But that’s how I view the ancient labyrinth in my mind. As for you, Marie, didn’t you say you wanted to go to the labyrinth to lose some weight already?” Marie made an embarrassed face after getting called out, and it was Shirley’s turn to burst into laughter. She was still completely silent, as usual, but she looked beautiful laughing under the bright sun.

Then, she struck a victorious pose with both fists clenched, which I took to mean she had accepted our invitation. Or maybe she just wanted to spend more time with us. Either way, I was glad. It seemed we would be able to stay together in the dream world, too.

There were some days when she had haunted me into Japan since, but I never sensed that lonely feeling of being left behind from her ever again.

I had wanted to give her peace, and I was glad to find out it was so simple. Who could have guessed that all it took was to ask her to hang out with us?

Now I wondered what her newfound powers were, but I decided to ask about it after we departed for our journey.

Having made our preparations, we finally decided to return to Arilai.

Epilogue

It was difficult to put into words.

The rubble crumbled away from under the soldier's foot, and he finally noticed as he nearly took a clumsy fall. He had been so entranced by the view that he wasn't watching his step.

It was impossible to see anything here without night vision, and it was completely silent from having rejected any intruders for such a long time. Looking up, the ceiling was too distant to make out, even with his ability to see in the dark.

His breath was a faint white as he exhaled. The dust falling down from above was like snow, and the way sound was absorbed without resonating here likewise reminded him of a landscape covered in deep snow.

"So this... is the third floor of the ancient labyrinth..." he said to no one in particular.

The structure of the labyrinth was completely different from what he had seen before, and the ceiling was staggeringly high. Looking around, he could see hollows and drawbridges all over the place, and he realized the place had an intricate three-dimensional design. This place was so full of magic that black crystals had formed in various spots.

"This is a surprise. It's just as my grandfather said. He said this place had morions growing all over it. This is the floor..."

"Yes, and this land is the destination we've been seeking. Though, I doubt your grandfather mentioned that this is the land of salvation," someone responded while supporting the soldier's arm so he wouldn't fall.

Maybe he was a little out of it. It could have been because he was actually seeing the place he had heard about in fairy tales in person. He casually looked up at the speaker, and his armor clinked noisily as he hurriedly stood up straight to salute.

“C-Captain?! My apologies!”

“At ease. I understand you’re amazed, but pull yourself together. Don’t forget you’re in the middle of a mission,” he said, and the soldier was surprised when the captain flashed a grin at him.

The captain was the biggest hard-ass around, and he had never been seen smiling like this before. This land continued to ward off humans as it always had. And yet, the captain appeared to be in a good mood as he passed by.

The soldier suddenly came to his senses and hurried after him while thinking over that earlier comment.

“Captain, what did you mean when you said this land is our destination?”

“It’s exactly as it sounds. Unlike the greedy humans, we demons have few desires. We only wish to eradicate the humans that are protected by god, and to bring back the former age.”

The captain’s side profile was as intense as ever, but he was more talkative than usual today. His color-faded hair swayed, and his shoes clicked against the ground as he continued to walk forward. Suddenly, his honey-colored eyes turned to the soldier.

“I hear that hero candidate, Zarish, was defeated by a human.”

The soldier was at a loss for words for some time. He was unable to process it right away. After taking several more steps toward the captain, the man clad in metal armor finally found his voice again.

“Do you mean to tell me someone actually took down that monster?! Then, does that mean the royals of Arilai have caught on to the hero candidate’s betrayal?”

“Judging by the situation, that would be the logical conclusion... But who knows? Even if they did notice, that man would never kneel, even before an entire army. That means he should have been able to cause some serious damage before being felled by the enemy.”

It was obvious from his phrasing that this was not the case. In other words, the scouts must not have reported anything along those lines. That meant the

hero candidate had been defeated by a small team, or even an individual, though that was hard to imagine. It was impossible to figure the situation out with such little information, but whatever happened, this would greatly affect the fight moving forward.

The soldier realized this, then slowly glanced toward the captain walking beside him. He was sure the captain would be concerned about it. But surprisingly, the man was grinning. It was that same carefree smile from earlier, as if a weight had been lifted off of his shoulders.

“Everything will all be fine now. More than half of the soldiers we’d been counting on managed to survive. I’m glad... We managed to make it in time.” There was something terrifying about that smile, which should have instead been comforting.

They had finally made it to the third floor, so was everything really going to work out? Come to think of it, the captain had left the soldier in the dark up until now. He never explained their objective, their plans, or why they needed to buy time to hold off the human invasion in the first place.

According to rumors, he had lived for an entire millennium. Rumors said that the color had completely faded from his hair over that unimaginably long span of years. How had he lived for so long? For what purpose?

Although his wide smile spread across his face, it didn’t reach his honey-colored eyes at all. Seeing his face from the side, a shiver ran down the soldier’s spine for some reason.

The captain eventually reached out his hand to touch a seemingly ordinary wall.

Then, the wall opened without a sound.

The armor-clad soldier immediately understood. This must have been the destination the captain had spoken of, and the reason he had been living for an entire millennium.

Countless specks of dust fell from the sky like snow, and the captain’s smile widened further. It was as if his smile was welcoming the finale of the story.

— Chapter of Midsummer to be continued in the next volume —

Afterword

Hello, this is Makishima Suzuki. The previous volume, Volume 5, was released in February of the second week of Reiwa (2020). Looking back, it was right before the world was shaken by the coronavirus. I hope you have all been healthy during this time. The state of emergency is no longer in effect, but I believe it will still take some time until things settle down completely.

Fortunately, my company has allowed us to work from home, so I have been able to put some distance between myself and most of the commotion. However, now that I no longer walk to work every day, I have been presented with an issue that is entirely new to me. Yes, due to a lack of exercise, I have been troubled by all of the weight I have gained. I do envy Kitase and Marie at times like these. You may wonder why, but it's because they can simply say, "Then, let's play in the other world for a while instead." So, I bought a high-end rice cooker to let out my frustration and to improve my meals at home. But my rice ended up tasting better, accelerating my weight gain as a result... Yes, I decided not to think about it too much.

After staying home for about three months, naturally, the season changed. The scorching summer arrived in the story as well, which was a very trying time for Mariabelle, as an elf who hated the cold and the heat. The humidity and heat is too much even for the Japanese, who are used to this climate.

But if they can find ways to have fun that can only be enjoyed in the summer, maybe they would feel differently about the stifling heat. Mariabelle views things differently than we do, so I hope you're able to turn the pages and get a peek into the elf girl's life... Though, since this volume is being released as an e-book, I doubt most people would read the afterword before reading the main story.

We are no longer making paper books as of the sixth volume, which may be disappointing for readers who had been collecting them on their bookshelves. I'd like to thank you from the bottom of my heart for purchasing and reading

my story. It amazes me just how much my feeling of gratitude grows with each additional volume.

I'll take this time to explain a bit about the e-books. I'm not sure if this is something I should write in the afterword, but my revenue will obviously decrease now that we are no longer doing paper books. This is because there is no longer any need to print a predetermined quantity, which means I won't be getting royalties for those copies. This part will vary depending on the publisher, but generally, e-books provide more revenue per copy sold, compared to their paper counterparts. I'll leave all of the money talk at that, but my goal is to have as many people enjoy the story as possible, so I'm not too concerned about the revenue part. With Yappen drawing the illustrations (they were adorable as usual) and Aonoesu working on the comic version (I've always loved their works), I've been having so much fun, I sometimes wonder if I truly deserve to be so blessed. This is part of the reason why I've put more work into revising and adding episodes than ever before, in hopes of making the series even more enjoyable.

It can be said that *Welcome to Japan, Ms. Elf!* is also a story about pursuing happiness. It may seem like they're always running around and laughing or enjoying themselves in leisure, but the situation is slowly changing, and appreciating that change is part of the fun. There will likely be many changes in the latter half of the Chapter of Midsummer. There are even plans to go to the pool and the beach marked in the calendar at the Kitase household.

Going back to the e-book topic again... In my case, it's been harder and harder to secure space to store books, so I've been reading e-books more often as of late. I wouldn't mind if it was just a book or two, but when it gets to several hundred, it can end up becoming an issue. I dread the idea that my family will tell me to get rid of them someday. I've been switching over to e-books lately, and not only do they save space, but I've found they have the advantage of being legible in the dark. It was quite a happy discovery when I found out I could read them anywhere, like while lying down or in my bedroom with the lights off. I also love the fact that I can read old books whenever I want.

I've been enjoying such changes to my lifestyle as I think of the storyline for this series. I hope you all have fun, peaceful, and fruitful days ahead.

Now, I look forward to greeting you all in the next afterword and will go back to writing.



**"I-I DID
GAIN A BIT
OF WEIGHT
LATELY!
I CAN PINCH
THE MEAT
ON MY
ARMS NOW!"**

**"...DID...
WEIGHT..."**

**"HM? WHAT
WAS THAT?"**

Mariabelle's
shoulders
trembled as
she opened
her mouth
to speak.

**Welcome to
6 Japan,
Ms. Elf!**



"WOW...!"

It was quite a wondrous sight. We could see the river flowing beneath us from the same point of view as birds in flight. The wind gently caressed our cheeks, and both Marie and Mewi were at a loss for words.



Seeing my
confusion,
the woman
tilted her
head in the
mirror.

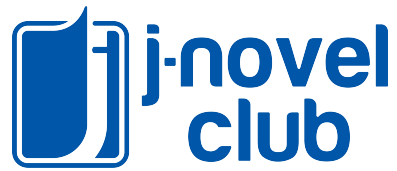
"HUH?
WHA...?
WHAT'S
GOING
ON?"











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Welcome to Japan, Ms. Elf! Volume 6

by Makishima Suzuki

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